The TIGER'S CLAW

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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By Albert Payson Terhune

LOCHINVAR LUCK
FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LAD
BUFF: A COLLIE
THE TIGER'S CLAW
THE AMATEUR INN
BLACK CÆSAR'S CLAN
BLACK GOLD
NOW THAT I'M FIFTY

New York:
George H. Doran Company

THE TIGER'S CLAW

BY

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE TIGER'S CLAW. II

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Chapter I

"YES, we call this 'The House of Peace,'" explained Donald Steele. "Eustace wanted us to have the phrase branded on every box of our peaches that we ship North. But it sounds too much like 'The House of Peach.' So I vetoed it."

The girl laughed, lightly, at his mild joke. She had a musical laugh; an infectious laugh; the sort of laugh that makes its hearer join in, with a laugh of his own, for no special reason.

Donald had known Elsie Duff but a week or two. Yet he had learned to listen for that laugh; and to love it. He had learned to watch for the delicious little crinkles around her big blue eyes when she laughed. Indeed, lately, he had taken to watching Elsie Duff and to thinking about her in a way that puzzled him.

His younger brother, Eustace, had met her at a house party, somewhere in Westchester, a few months earlier while he had been paying his annual round of visits to the various commission

houses which handled the Steele brothers' products. Eustace had written glowing letters about her, to his stay-at-home elder brother. Apparently, he and Elsie had seen much of each other during that brief stay in the North.

Then, Elsie and her married sister, Mrs. Gray, had come south for the winter. They had made their first stop at Savannah; within a bare five miles of the Steele peach ranch. Since then, Eustace Steele had been practically worthless as a business partner. The bulk of the farm work had fallen on the graver and older Donald; while Eustace had escorted Elsie and her sister to all manner of local sights, from Tybee to the Terrapin Farm.

More—he had pressed the busy Donald into service, whenever he could, as escort for the uninspiring elder sister of his divinity. In spite of his duties as escort to the chaperone, Donald had found time to feel the spell of the younger girl; and to wonder morbidly whether she were as interested in Eustace as Eustace very patently was interested in her.

This afternoon, the two sisters had driven across to the peach farm for five o'clock tea. Mrs. Gray, by some happy mischance, had a blinding headache; and had gone indoors to lie down. Five minutes later, a telephone call from beyond Beaulieu had told Eustace that a long-expected con-

signment of spraying-apparatus had been landed at the brothers' dock near there.

A wrenched wrist prevented Donald from driving thither in the truck for the waiting boxes. In that realm of light-fingered roustabouts, there was no question of leaving the precious consignment lying unguarded on the little private dock amid the off-shore sedges of the yellow river. So, perforce, Eustace had set forth in the truck; leaving the entertainment of his fair guest to his elder brother.

Elsie Duff looked down the slopes of flower-starred lawn, beneath the arches of live-oaks with their gray robes of moss, to the stretch of sunset-illumined river beyond.

"I don't wonder you call it 'The House of Peace,'" said she, dreamily. "It is all so beautiful, so calm, so—so out of the world! It seems a million miles from the rush and racket of the North. You must be very happy here."

"We are," he answered, simply. "But, then, Eustace and myself are apt to be pretty happy anywhere—so long as we're together. We've been pals ever since we were old enough to take each other's lickings in school. Eustace is the greatest pal a man ever had."

"But how did you ever happen to throw over your law-career in New York and come clear down here?" she asked, curiously. "Or is that none of

my business? I only asked because it seemed so queer that two rising young lawyers—"

"Of course it's your business," he interrupted. "Anything concerning us is your business—as much as you'll consent to let it be your business. Well, the first thing that jolted us out of our dull little law-office on Nassau Street was not a 'thing' at all. It was a person. Or, rather, a personage. A personage with a professionally eagle eye and turned-up mustaches and a withered arm and a silver bonnet with a falcon on it. His name was Bill Hohenzollern. He kicked up a war; and Uncle Sam got into it; and Eustace and I volunteered. We had done a bit of aviation, for fun, down at Mineola and around there. So we enlisted in the air-service."

"I know," she said, with a tinge of admiration. "Your brother told me up North. He said you were an 'ace' and had ever so many medals and—"

"He'd have become an ace, himself, long before I did," disclaimed Steele, "if it hadn't been for the fall that sent him to a base hospital for six months and left him an invalid. When we got home he was in no shape to jump back into the hustle of law-work; or even to stand the noise of a big city. This old peach farm, down here, had been left to us, jointly, by our great-uncle. We used to spend our vacations on it when we were kids, you know. So we decided to come here; and

to take a whirl at peach-growing. That was three years ago. And we've made a fairly good thing of it. The best part is that good old Eustace is on his feet again. As well as ever he was. He—"

"And you threw over a career—perhaps a golden career," she exclaimed, "you turned your back on your future and your friends and on everything that spelt happiness to you—just to bury yourself down here in the Georgia wilderness for the sake of your invalid brother! Oh, Mr. Steele, it was—why, it was magnificent of you! It—"

"Nonsense!" he laughed, direfully embarrassed and uncomfortable, at her impulsive praise and at the light of keen admiration that leaped into her blue eyes. "I did nothing of the sort. I'd rather do this sort of thing than wear out my eyes and cramp my shoulders over a law-office desk. My father was a farmer. It's in the blood—this love of mine for the soil. It wasn't a question of sacrifice. I enjoy it. And even if I didn't—well, the sight of Eustace husky and happy again would be worth the throwing over of all the careers that ever careered. So that's that. Eustace means a lot to me. He—"

A rustle in the wistaria vines, at the foot of the porch, cut short his homily. He and Elsie both glanced in the direction of the sound.

Out from among the tangle of green leaves

slowly emerged a classic bronze head; shapely, deep-set of eye, clean of outline. Slowly, following the head, emerged a shaggy and shapely body, bronze-and-white. In the open space of the gravel drive stood revealed a huge collie dog.

He stretched himself, fore-and-aft, in true collie fashion, after his nap. Then, his dark eyes catching sight of the two on the veranda above him, the plumed tail began to wag, and the tulip ears flattened back into the shaggy ruff. For the barest instant the great dog stood thus, while the fading sunset cast a shimmer about his massive coat. His shoulders were as broad and his chest as deep as a Newfoundland's. His lean thighs and clean white legs bespoke speed as well as unwonted power. In his eyes glinted the quaintly mischievous intelligence which sets the collie apart from the general run of dogs. Then—

"Bronze!" said Donald.

At the name, the collie cleared the high veranda rail at a single light bound, and stood at his master's side; looking with tense eagerness up into Donald's face.

"You haven't spoken to Miss Duff," Donald reminded him, accompanying the hint with a gesture so slight as to escape the girl's notice.

The collie walked across to where Elsie sat and, solemnly, laid one small white forepaw in her lap.

"Oh, he's beautiful!" declared she, catching the

dog's classic head between her two little hands and rumpling his soft ears. "And to think of his coming across to greet me when you told him to!"

The man was watching her with new interest as she petted the pleased animal and spoke croonингly to him in the sweet high voice that collies love.

"You're used to dogs," he said, suddenly. "More than that, you're used to collies. No outsider would handle Bronze like that."

"We always had collies at home," said she; adding, half under her breath, "when there was a home."

"See," she went on, "he's taken a liking to me already. And I don't believe he cares for strangers, as a rule, does he? This type of collie doesn't."

"No," replied Donald Steele, "he doesn't. I've taught him to go to guests, at my signal; and offer them his paw. But, as soon as that duty is done, he has a way of clearing out of their immediate neighborhood. I never saw him stay so long beside any other stranger."

As Steele spoke, Bronze proceeded to curl himself up at Elsie's feet, daintily laying his head across one of her tiny shoes.

"Two more visits, at this rate," grumbled Donald, in mock anger, "and he'll follow you back home. And then I'll be minus the best pal I ever had—except old Eustace."

Elsie stooped to rumple the collie's ears again. Donald gazed at her from between half-shut eyes. She and the dog made a picturesque tableau there in the sunset. She was so little, so childish in form and face; so indescribably lovable! The man's heart tightened. And, astounded at his own emotion, he turned his eyes away.

All in a flash, he knew he cared for her—cared for her as he had never cared for any other woman in all his twenty-eight busy years. And, with the realization, came the memory of the way Eustace was wont to look at her and the way the younger brother's voice softened when he chanced to speak of her.

If Eustace really cared—!

Donald set his teeth, to choke back a sigh. All his life he had sacrificed himself to this dashingly lovable younger brother of his. And, all his life, until now, he had rejoiced in the sacrifice. But, in the past few seconds, the world somehow seemed changed. He could not look forward to this possible sacrifice without a pang of sharp pain.

Resolutely he sought to drive the bitter thought from his mind. And the effort made him aware that Elsie Duff was speaking again.

"How long have you had him?" she asked. "Did you breed him yourself, or did you buy him? I'd like to see his pedigree, if you have it."

"His pedigree," answered Steele, glad of idle speech, to dull his new stress of mind, "his pedigree began in a dugout, near Meran-en-Laye, in northern France. At least, it began there so far as I am concerned. A Scotch aviation officer had come back from 'blighty'—home-leave, you know, —and brought him along. Bronze was a fuzzy little pup, not more than two months old, at most. All legs and feet; and with the sorrowfullest bits of eyes you ever saw."

"That's a collie puppy, all over!" she chimed in. "Before they're old enough to have had any suffering or fright, their eyes seem to hold all the sadness in the world. Especially, a mischievous puppy."

"His master and I were at the same mess for a couple of days," went on Steele. "Then our planes went up, side by side, one morning. His never came back. I heard the poor pup whimpering for food that night. And I adopted him. He's been with me ever since. He used to make every flight with me. There was no holding him back when my plane was going to take off. He knew its engine-purr from all the others. He and I went up, together, hundreds of times. Twice, he was with me when my plane was shot down. Once we came down in flames; and I had to wrap my sheepskin coat all over him to keep him from getting

burnt. Oh, we had grand times together, Bronze and I! I brought him home. He's been my shadow ever since. He still goes up with me."

"Goes up with you?" she echoed.

"Yes. I thought Eustace must have told you. I bought my old army plane and patched it up; and built a ramshackle hangar for it, down at the Beaulieu end of our farm. I go up, once in a while, when I get tired of spraying peach trees and studying soil problems and tinkering with blight and scale and such like joys. I—"

Bronze created a diversion by raising his head and sniffing the still afternoon air with sudden disapproval.

Around the bend of the narrow and dustily rutted byroad, a furlong to northward, appeared a man and a dog.

The man was of unbelievable height and bulk. He had the aspect of the Farnese Hercules. A thatch of bright red close-cropped hair crowned his bullet head. A close-cropped fiery red beard covered his heavy jaw. His wide shoulders were thrown back. He walked with a soldierly precision. To add to his martial aspect, he carried, at "port," an absurdly small target rifle, of .22 caliber.

Sedately, at his heels, paced a big grayish German police dog; beautiful in his wolflike lines and aspect of alert power.

"Quiet, Bronze!" ordered Steele, as the collie growled, far down in his shaggy throat.

Turning to Elsie Duff, he explained:

"That is our nearest neighbor, Oskar Brand. His wharf is next to ours, down at Beaulieu. (Or 'Bewly,' as the place is called, hereabouts.) And that's Hunding, his police dog—shepherd dogs, they're called, nowadays, I believe. As a rule, Bronze pays no attention to passing dogs. But he makes it a pious duty to growl, at least once, whenever Hunding trots by. I've taught him not to let the displeasure go any further. But he insists on his one growl. The two dogs have never met at close quarters. And I hope they'll never meet. If they do, there is liable to be one less dog in the world. I don't know which one."

"Oskar Brand?" queried Elsie, curiously, her eyes fixed in new interest on the advancing giant. "Oh, I know all about him! Your brother told me about him. Now I understand why your eyebrows came together for an instant when you saw him."

"Eustace told you, did he?" asked Donald, trying to make light of the matter. "Well, after all, there was nothing much to tell. Brand is a sort of 'Man of Mystery.' That's what people around here call him. He owns that rambling big Colonial mansion, back yonder, with the clutter of funny outhouses around it. And he appears there for a

few days, off and on—he and his dog. Then they both disappear again. That's about all. At least, it's about all any one really knows. The rest is guesswork."

"Your brother seems to think there's a great deal more," said Elsie. "He was telling me about it the other day. He said the man is suspected of being one of the prime movers in the wholesale liquor-running around Savannah. He says Brand is a German; and that his police dog is supposed to have had a war record on the other side. He says the man and the dog are inseparable; and that some of the superstitious negroes believe the dog is a demon who waits on Brand as a 'familiar spirit.'"

"The negroes around here—the ignorant ones—will believe anything!" scoffed Donald.

Elsie's face grew more serious.

"Your brother," she continued, "told me of seeing a queer cargo landing at Brand's wharf late one night; of Brand's ordering him away; of his refusing to go and of Brand's trying to use force to eject him—and of his resenting it by driving his fist into Brand's face; and the crew separating them before they could fight. He says it took three of the men to keep the police dog from flying at him. Perhaps that accounts for your face clouding when you caught sight of Brand just now."

"Perhaps," assented Donald, shortly.

He did not add that Brand had challenged Eustace to mortal combat, German-fashion, as a result of the blow; and that, when Eustace had laughed at the idiotic challenge, he had sworn to wipe out the insult with the younger Steele's life.

Donald and Eustace were firm believers in the old French proverb: "Threatened men live long." Thus they gave scant thought to the German's windy menaces. But, thereafter, they had dropped even the very slight acquaintanceship they formerly had maintained with their red-headed and gigantic next-door neighbor.

A threat to Eustace had ever been an affront to Donald. And the elder brother cherished a wholesome dislike for the giant who had thus squabbled with his adored brother and who had threatened Eustace's life. True, Oskar Brand had sought to patch up some kind of peace, a day or so later, by writing a civil note to the effect that he had been drunk when he sought to throw Eustace off the dock next his own; and when he had challenged him and vowed to kill him. He asked the brothers' pardon. And Donald, writing for them both, had accepted the apology.

There, overtly, the matter ended. But Donald was not able to rid himself of the acute dislike he felt for his Teuton neighbor.

Now, as Brand and his dog swung past the gate, on their way southward toward the docks, Oskar

glanced in at the vine-clad veranda. Catching sight of Elsie's white dress, in the chair opposite Donald, he lifted his hat in punctilious courtesy. Then, his small eyes contracting, he looked more sharply at the girl. He hesitated, irresolute, took an onward step or two, hesitated again; then came to a halt.

Turning back, to the Steele gate, he called to Donald:

"I ask pardon, Mr. Steele, for disturbing you. But may I speak with you, here, for a moment? It is a matter of much import."

There was politeness in the thickly-accented tones. But there was a shade of perturbation, too.

Reluctantly, Donald obeyed the summons; wondering and resentful.

"Excuse me," began Brand, with some abruptness. "Will you tell me the name of the—the young lady yonder on the porch with you? I don't ask from impertinence."

"I can't see that that is any affair of yours," was Donald's stiff reply; the question nettling him unaccountably. "She is my brother's guest—and mine. She and the married sister who is chaperoning her," he added, vexed again at the need of making this explanation.

"I meant no offense," returned Brand, speaking with that same covert earnestness; but with an

evident effort at civility. "Yet—from the glimpse of her, on your veranda, just now—"

He broke off, his small eyes straying furtively back toward the porch where, half-hidden by the vines, Elsie Duff was sitting.

"I may have been mistaken," he finished, lamely. "Again, I ask pardon for what may have seemed rude."

Donald Steele nodded; and turned back toward the house. Brand made as though to move on.

As Steele had started down the steps in compliance with Brand's call, Bronze had run eagerly ahead. Steele had whistled him back, and bidden him stay where he was. He craved no clash between his loved collie and the giant police dog which stood sniffing menacingly at him from Brand's side.

Bronze moved back, right unwillingly, at Steele's command. Elsie called him to her; and sat stroking his silken head; while his troubled dark eyes remained fixed on his departing master.

As Steele turned to face the house again, Bronze left Elsie and trotted to the edge of the veranda steps to welcome him. Steele had bidden him stay where he was. But the veranda was "where he was." And, without disobeying the letter of the command, he advanced to the outermost edge of the circumscribed space. Which is the way of collies and children alike.

Elsie saw him start for the steps. Not knowing he would pause at their summit, and recalling Donald's fear lest the two dogs meet, she jumped up and hurried to the top of the steps, seizing the dog gently by his massive bronze ruff.

This brought the girl out from the shadow of the vines and in full view from the road. Brand, as he turned to continue his walk, caught sight of her fluttering white skirt. He glanced back, over his shoulder, at her as she stood thus in the dying daylight.

Instantly he came to a halt.

"No," he declared hotly, facing the annoyed Steele, afresh. "I was right. I knew I was. Who is that girl? Tell me!"

The stark eagerness in his voice was no longer masked. Its civility was gone. He spoke as if addressing a delinquent servant.

Donald Steele's face went red with anger at the tone. Making no reply, he turned on his heel and took a step toward the gate. He did not wish, in sight of Elsie, to quarrel with this vulgar giant. The slurring phrase, "that girl," stung him to a fighting wrath. He dared not trust himself to reply.

Brand flung out a detaining hand toward the receding man's shoulder. The hand fell short. In another stride, Steele covered the few feet between himself and the gate. He stepped through

the gateway, disregarding Brand's harsh request that he stop.

A moment more and the gate would have slammed shut behind the silently raging man.

But Oskar Brand's own hard-held temper frayed under the insulting departure of the neighbor he had sought to question and under his own keen desire for an answer to his query. Addressing the tensely watching police dog, he said swiftly, in German:

"Stop him, Hunding!"

Like a streak of gray shadow, the enormous dog lunged forward. Scarce were Brand's words rapped out, when Hunding was in the gateway, barring Steele's further progress.

Hunding did not attack his human opponent. He had been ordered merely to "stop" Steele. And he did so.

Donald paused, involuntarily, at sight of the ferociously crouching brute that blocked his way. Elsie Duff cried out, in alarm; and came running down the steps and the gravel walk toward them.

But, before she had descended half the short flight of steps,—before she had taken more than the first impulsive move forward,—there was a streak of tawny light—a wild-beast snarl—a whirlwind of fast-flying feet—and something catapulted past her toward the gate.

Bronze had been watching the scene, ears cocked, head on one side. With a collie's queer insight, he had divined that his master and Oskar Brand were angry at each other. Nothing but Steele's mandate kept him in his place on the porch.

Then the wholesomely disliked police dog had sprung to bar Steele's way; and was threatening him with bared teeth and hideously wrinkled lips.

For the first and last time in his loyal life, Bronze disobeyed a command of Donald's. This was no moment to remember he had been bidden to stay on the porch—now that his adored master was menaced by the great gray brute he hated.

In a single mighty spring, Bronze launched himself into the air. That first spring cleared the whole short veranda stairway and brought him out into the middle of the gravel walk. Thence, like a flung spear, he hurled himself at Hunding.

So swift was his charge that neither Brand nor Steele had scope to observe it. Full against the crouching Hunding he crashed. His impact threw the police dog off balance. Avidly, Bronze drove for his foe's throat.

Before he could drive his jaws home, Hunding had whirled to one side, rolling over with bewildering speed; while a slash from Bronze's deflected fang laid open the skin of his hip.

In another instant both dogs were on their feet and had come together with a jarring shock. As they did so, Brand cried, sternly:

"Hunding! *Hier!*"

In the same breath, Donald Steele yelled:

"Back, Bronze!"

At first sound of Brand's voice, Hunding leaped back from the assault; even though he must have known the action left him open to his opponent's raging teeth. Even in the stress of excitement, Donald found scope to notice and subconsciously to admire the marvelous machinelike obedience of the police dog.

Bronze, through the rage-mists, had heard his master's sharp recall. And he, too, drew back;—but reluctantly and with slow and grudging obedience. He growled as he came to Donald, and his eyes were ever on his enemy.

Hunding did not favor him with a glance. He had received word to come at once to Brand; and, he was watching the German's lowering face for further orders. Evidently, he felt he had no right to indulge private warfare, while his master might have orders for him.

"What in blue blazes did you mean by setting your dog on me?" fiercely demanded Steele, shaking with indignation.

"I did not 'set him' on you," returned Brand,

his eyes fixed piercingly on the advancing Elsie, whose approach Donald did not note. "If I had 'set him on you,' as you call it, your foolish collie would have arrived too late. I told him to 'stop' you. That was all. I told him to do that, because it was needful I ask you an important question; and you had not the courtesy to remain to answer it. I shall ask it, now, of the person who best can answer it."

Following, perplexed, the direction of the big German's gaze, Donald saw Elsie range herself alongside him, flushed and panting from the excitement of her brief run.

"What is it?" she asked Steele, nervously. "What is the matter? Why did—?"

"Fräulein," broke in the German. "I am Oskar Brand. Without rudeness, I ask who you are and—"

"Please go back to the house, Miss Duff!" begged Donald. "I'm sorry that any guest of ours should be annoyed in this way. I will stay here to answer any questions this man has a right to ask; and to refuse to answer any others. Please—"

"My name is Duff," said Elsie, unheeding his protest, and facing Brand. "May I ask what concern it is of yours?"

She spoke without excitement. And her question carried a tone of curiosity, rather than of rebuke.

"It is a concern of mine," returned Brand, as Steele sought again to interpose, "because I have seen your face once before. At least, a minute ago I was sure I had. And now, at close quarters, I am still practically sure. I—"

"It is quite likely," said Elsie, with the air of one who humors an idiot or a drunkard; and again disregarding Steele. "I live in New York. I have lived there nearly always. And I have been in and around Savannah for the past fortnight or more. It is quite possible you may have seen me. But does that justify you in setting your dog on Mr. Steele and your insisting on asking me such a question?"

"Miss Duff!" besought Steele. "Won't you please go back and leave this man to me? It is—"

"Miss Duff," cut in Brand, his deep voice breaking in on Donald's words and booming over them, "when I look up from my reading, late at night, in my own room, and see a beautiful face peering in at me, through the narrow gap in the window curtain,—when I hurry to the window, only to find that face gone—when no trace of any intruder can be found about my house or grounds, well, can you blame me for making inquiries when I see that face again the next afternoon? Can you? That must be my excuse. You ask what concern your name is to me. I ask what concern it is of yours

to glide silently at midnight to my windows and peep in at me as I am reading. Perhaps—"

"Man, you're insane!" sputtered Steele. "Or else you're drunk again. In either case—"

"Please!" intervened Elsie, her big eyes alight with wonder. "Please, Mr. Steele! Don't stop him. This is interesting. And he doesn't seem to be either drunk or crazy. Mr. Brand, you say you saw a face staring in at you, at midnight, last evening; and that you recognize it as mine? I don't wonder you want to know who I am and how I happened to be doing such a thing. You are entitled to all sorts of explanations. You are sure it was at midnight? Not earlier? Not later? Think!"

"It was at just four minutes past twelve," insisted Brand, though apparently puzzled by her manner, which was that of an intensely interested child. "How do I know? I had letters to write. And when I finished them I sat down to read. I grew drowsy. It had been a long day. I looked up at the wall-clock. It was at four minutes past twelve. I had not known it was so late. So I laid down my book to go to bed. And as I laid it down my eyes were caught by a blur of light color through the black of the window-pane, between the curtains. I looked. There was your face. It was watching me. I got up and ran to the window. But—"

"You told us that part before!" snapped Donald. "And the whole thing is preposterous! Why, at midnight, Miss Duff was—"

"Wait!" Elsie bade him.

Again she turned to the irresolute Brand.

"I am glad you could fix the hour so precisely," said she. "Last evening, my sister and Mr. Steele, here, and his brother and myself went to the John McCormack recital at the Bijou. It was a long recital. For it began late; and nearly every number was encored. We didn't get back to the De Soto Hotel until ten minutes after eleven. Then we all had supper there. Mr. Steele and his brother didn't leave the hotel until quarter past twelve. That can be proved by both of them and by my sister and by a night porter they sent for more gas for their car. It is some miles from the De Soto here, Mr. Brand. If I had rushed here at the rate of a mile a minute the instant they left us I could not very well have been spying at your chastely curtained window eleven minutes earlier than our two escorts said good-by to us in the foyer of the De Soto, back in Savannah. Could I, now?"

Brand's narrowed little eyes had not once left her face. Steele, watching him, could mark no change in the heavy features of the giant. As Elsie paused, Oskar Brand straightened, with military precision. Lifting his hat, with a gesture

which was more like a martial salute than a mere bow, he clicked his heels together.

"I am a fool," he said, slowly, as though choosing his every word. "I was drowsy, as I told you. Probably I dozed. Probably, too, I had had the good fortune to catch sight of your face, somewhere in Savannah, on the same day or on an earlier day. Probably that face remained in my inner mind subconsciously. That cannot be wondered at, if I may venture to say so. I dreamed of it again. And the dream was so vivid that it seemed sharp reality. Then—"

He paused. Steele's eye fell from the German's utterly moveless face to the huge and sinewy hands. These hands were clasped about the target rifle. They were so tight-clenched as to be white to the very knuckles. Into Donald's memory flashed the wise old maxim:

"If you want to know whether a man is lying, watch his hands; not his face."

Before Donald could fairly register this impression on his own mind, Oskar Brand went on, humbly:

"Psychologists have a term for that sort of thing. I do not remember it. But I remember that I have behaved like an imbecile and a boor; and that I have made myself offensive to a good neighbor and to his lovely guest. From my heart, I offer contrite apologies."

Through the humility, Steele's prejudiced senses seemed to read absolute hypocrisy and a purpose he could not fathom. But before either he or Elsie could speak, Brand had bowed stiffly again and had said a single word to Hunding. Then, the police dog close beside him, he was striding southward again, through the early twilight.

"How—how strange it all is!" stammered Elsie.

Now the incident was over, the girl seemed frightened and almost hysterical. "And what a strange man! He has the most compelling personality I have ever found. When he was so meek—and even before then, when he was catechizing us—all I could think of was the—the sheathed claws of a tiger!"

"You're a bit overwrought," he made reply, as he noted the slight catch in her voice. "Let's go back to the porch. I'll ring for more tea. I'm ever so sorry such a rotten episode marred your first visit to The House of Peace!"

"I wonder why he carries that little rifle," she ventured, as they strolled toward the house. "If he does it to protect himself, surely that great dog of his would be more formidable than a .22 caliber popgun, wouldn't he?"

"He doesn't carry it for protection," said Donald. "This is a safe region. Brand wanders along the shore, sometimes, in the afternoon, and takes pot-shots at gulls and crows. He does it for amuse-

ment. And he's a miraculous shot, by the way. I've seen him bring down a fast wheeling gull, at eighty yards, from a hip-aim. A snap aim, at that. His rifle is of German make. It carries a high-power cartridge, apparently; in spite of its littleness. . . . Shan't we talk of something less unappetizing? Here comes the fresh tea."

The soft dusk was settling down over the reaches of marsh grass and river. From the water crept up a faint reek of white mist.

"I wonder where Eustace is," said Donald, after a time, as he and Elsie sat chatting in the twilight with Bronze sleeping at their feet. "He ought to have been back here half an hour ago. Shall we stroll down the road to meet him? You might enjoy a truck-ride back here if you've never had one. The moon will be up, too, in another few minutes."

It was for Eustace's sake, rather than for his own, that Steele suggested their going down the road to meet his brother. Personally, he was happy to sit alone there with her, in the cool dusk —happier than ever before he had been. But his conscience smote him at loafing thus, while some obstacle or breakdown had detained the brother who also cared for her.

She made no answer, but got to her feet; and walked with him down the path to the gate and out onto the floury dust of the rutted little road.

Bronze, overjoyed at prospect of a ramble, galloped ahead of them and around them, barking his delight.

Then, of a sudden, the collie ceased gamboling. He stood stock still, quivering as with a chill. His classic muzzle pointed skyward.

Through the still twilight air he shook forth a long-drawn wolf-howl; a scream so penetratingly agonized and so poignant that the man and the girl shuddered.

"What on earth—?" cried Donald.

But his query was lost in a second and more heart-rendingly weird howl from the quivering dog.

"Look!" gasped Elsie, grasping Steele's arm convulsively. "Oh, *look!*"

Chapter II

DONALD STEELE followed the direction of Elsie's eagerly pointing hand. Both of them stared in half-awed perplexity at the collie.

Bronze had ceased his unearthly wolf-howls. Again he had sniffed the still air. Then, stomach to ground, he had begun to crawl forward.

Thus might a beaten dog creep to the feet of a brutal master. Thus, too, might a dog creep toward his prey. Ears flattened back, every quivering muscle tensed, the collie stole forward. He did not pay the slightest heed to his two human companions.

There was something eerie, something abnormal, in the strange advance. In straight line, at that same stealthy pace, Bronze moved on, down the road. Elsie seemed unable to take her hypnotized gaze from him. Neither she nor Donald spoke. But, instinctively, they followed.

Fifty yards below, the road looped in a wide half-circle, not returning to its former course for about a furlong. Coming to this spot, Bronze did not follow the road's course; but continued in his chosen straight line, not regaining the road until he struck it at the end of the half-circle.

The short cut carried him over rough ground

and a four-foot rotting rail fence. Only once did he abandon that quiveringly crouching position. That was when he came to the fence. With no apparent effort, he cleared its four-foot top rail, in a light bound; and instantly returned to his stomach-to-earth gait.

Keeping to the dusty highway, Donald and the girl continued to follow. At last Elsie broke the wondering silence by asking:

"What is the matter? What ails him, do you suppose? I never saw a dog behave so, before."

"Neither did I," said Donald, as bewildered as she. "If it was any dog but Bronze, I'd say he had gone daffy. But—"

"He moves as if he were stalking prey," she interposed. "Or else as if he was in mortal terror. I can't make out which."

"He isn't in mortal terror, any way," answered Steele. "Bronze doesn't know what fear is. And no dog—no animal of any sort—would keep on stalking prey, like that, for all the distance Bronze has kept it up. I don't understand it, at all. Well," he finished, with an effort at laughing off the odd sense of mystery which had stolen over him, "we were going along this road, anyhow, to meet old Eustace. And as this is the line of march —or rather the line of crawl—that Bronze has chosen, we can see how his adventure ends, without turning out of our way."

"Did you ever hear such a weird, horrible sound, as when he howled, that way?" she asked, with a little reminiscent shudder. "It went through me, to the very heart. That cry of his seemed to hold all the grief and despair in the world. Does he often howl like that?"

"Never before," said Steele. "He's the steadiest and most self-contained and sensible dog I ever had. But collies aren't just like any other dog. There's a strain of mystery in them; a sort of second sight. McGregor, of the Twenty-seventh, told me his father had a collie, back in Scotland, that made night hideous with death-howls, at the very hour his master was drowned—three hundred miles away. There's lots about a collie that nobody has ever been able to explain."

The dog had regained the road, at the half-circle's end. At a slightly faster pace, he moved unerringly forward; now and again lifting his classic head to sniff the air.

Dusk was closing in. The near-by turbid water glinted like dull silver amid its low-lying reedy banks. Above, the white Southern stars were beginning to come into view, one by one. In the east, an ever-brightening glow foretold the rising of the full moon. To the left, the lights of Savannah shone against the evening's few scattered clouds.

Steele paused, for perhaps the tenth time, listen-

ing for the rumbling of Eustace's truck-wheels. Then, refusing to yield to the sensation of worry which assailed him at his brother's prolonged absence and at Bronze's unaccountable conduct, he began to talk, lightly, of the first theme that came into his head.

"I'm glad you and your sister like Savannah so much," he said, glancing at the wisps of high clouds which reflected the city's lights. "It's unlike any of the other long-settled cities of the South. For one thing, it is by far the cleanest of them. Then its scattering of bright little parks, at every few blocks, and the beautiful old houses and gardens —all these, with the liveliness and up-to-dateness of a Northern city. In others of the old-time Southern cities, you'll see the buzzards hanging over the streets. You'll almost never see a buzzard flying over Savannah. That fact, by itself, is the city's best proof of cleanliness. Are you going to stay there much longer? I hope so."

"So do I," said the girl, falling in with his attempt to keep their talk normal. "I'd like to spend the rest of the season down here. And it is doing my sister ever so much good. There's a picturesque sight, isn't it?" she broke off, nodding toward a silvery stretch of water, to the right of their riverside road.

The topmost rim of the moon was peeping into view over the edge of the marshes. It sent a flat

golden ray across the sheet of water. Midway athwart the vista, a low bargelike boat was moving. It sped as silently as a ghost; and the phosphorus glow played lividly in its wake.

"It's like a sepia drawing," said Elsie. "That boat is just the touch of movement and life the picture needed—though in this shimmery light it looks more like a spirit boat than one with human life."

"A spirit boat?" he echoed. "That is probably just what it is. A boat chockful of spirits."

"A ghost-ship?" she asked, in mock horror.

"No," said Steele. "A booze-running ship. These waters are full of them. Savannah is one of the chief ports of entry, for the liquor trade, just now. You see, there are hundreds of miles of rivers, all tangled up, hereabouts; with thousands of inlets and creeks and suchlike ideal hiding places. It's a paradise for smugglers. The stuff is run across from Cuba or the Bahamas; and then hidden in these backwaters where no revenue officer is likely to be able to find it. From here, it is sent secretly over the rest of the country."

"Abominable!" she exclaimed, in a gust of indignation.

"Perhaps," said Donald, smiling at her vehemence. "But I can't work up much interest in the subject one way or the other. I don't drink. But that's largely because I don't happen to care for it;

and because I've seen what it can do to many a better man than I. But, when I see a booze-boat, heavy-laden, slip past us on the river, it doesn't fire me with any keen desire to turn its owners over to the law."

"Your brother says Oskar Brand is supposed to be the master-spirit in the liquor-smuggling in these waters," said Elsie.

"That's only rumor," replied Steele. "But I fancy it's pretty authentic, at that. The industry seems to be controlled, in this region, by some one guiding hand. And the man at the head of it must be making millions at record speed. He has to be wily, too. For the revenue agents are everywhere. They—"

The rising moon revealed Bronze, in vivid clearness, a few rods in front of them. The dog had halted in his progress and was sniffing the ground. Donald went forward and laid his hand on the collie's ruff. Gentle as was the touch, Bronze started as violently as if he had been struck. He seemed aware, for the first time, of his master's presence.

Whimpering, he thrust his nose into Steele's cupped palm; and looked up at the man in an anguish of entreaty.

"What is it, old boy?" asked Donald. "What's wrong?"

By way of answer, the dog resumed his crouch-

ing motion; creeping on for perhaps thirty feet and then looking back in invitation to his master to follow.

"A man can do worse than obey a good dog's hunch," mused Donald. "Bronze has some mighty strong reason for acting as he does; and for wanting me to come along with him. I hope to the Lord that nothing has happened to Eustace. If I were superstitious—"

He ceased, realizing that he was doing his thinking aloud. Elsie moved closer to him.

"Please don't worry," she urged, gently. "I'm sure it is all right. I was afraid that was what you were thinking about all the time. And I wanted to tell you not to be afraid. Your brother is so strong and so resourceful! Nothing could ever happen to him; especially on a public road, so near his own home. If he's been delayed, it must have been by some breakdown of the truck. Or else—"

"We'll know in a few minutes," said Steele. "The dock is just around that bend of the road, a half-mile below. I'm sorry I was so foolish as to let you see I was worried. You're a brick, to be so sympathetic about it."

He checked himself; wondering morbidly how much of her speech of reassurance had been for his benefit and how much an effort to reassure herself about Eustace. And again that indefinable pang came to him; the fear lest he might have to

sacrifice this new-born love for Elsie on the altar of Eustace's happiness.

For the second time he put the thought from him, as being unworthy. He had no proof that his brother was seriously in love with this dainty maiden who had captured his own hitherto immune heart.

Eustace was susceptible. He was forever fancying himself in love with some girl or other. Perhaps this might be such a case; though Donald Steele could not imagine any mortal man caring lightly for a woman like Elsie Duff. Still, until he could know—and know definitely—he felt he had no right to urge his own suit nor even to let the girl guess he cared.

Once more his attention was caught by Bronze. The collie halted directly in front of Donald and Elsie. From his shaggy throat issued a growl of stark menace. His powerful body was stiff. His near-sighted eyes were turned toward a low ridge of land which bisected the flat road a hundred yards ahead.

No longer was there trouble or unhappiness in the dog's aspect. Every inch of him bristled with ferocity. He was tensed for a spring forward as if to hurl himself on some foe.

Fearing lest the collie might dash into some ill-advised fight, Donald caught Bronze firmly by the ruff.

"Quiet down!" he commanded. "What on earth ails you, Bronze? You've been acting like some fool puppy for the past half hour. Stop it, and behave yourself."

He spoke with unwonted sharpness, for his own nerves were beginning to fray like those of his dog. Bronze looked up again, swiftly, into his master's face as though astonished by the rare reproof. But, at once, he shifted his gaze to the ridge.

Donald could feel his muscles tighten; and could hear the muttered growl far down in his throat. Once more, Steele commanded:

"Quiet!"

The collie ceased growling. But he did not abate in the least his air of alert fierceness. Nor did he remove his glaring look from the ridge.

"He'll have us all jumpy, at this rate!" complained Donald with a forced laugh. "I can't make him out. He's never been like this."

"He is staring at that line of higher ground over in front," said Elsie, her own voice shot with threads of nervousness. "And he's sniffing. They say a dog is the most near-sighted animal in the world; and that he relies ten times as much on his nostrils as on his eyes. I wonder—"

She did not finish the sentence. The moon, which had risen over the marsh-grass, had not yet appeared above the low crest of the ridge. But

its radiance silhouetted the crest with sharp distinctness; bringing into black relief every outline of ground.

And now, across the narrow space thus brightened by the moon's approach, moved two figures.

They moved rapidly. But, for a moment, both of them were silhouetted sharply against the glowing patch of skyline.

Donald and Elsie Duff had no difficulty in recognizing both of them in that one fleeting glance. Steele's grip tightened on the fidgeting collie's ruff. Elsie shrank a little closer to her escort.

The silhouetted figures were those of Oskar Brand and his huge police dog, Hunding.

The giant German was striding along swiftly, his absurdly small rifle now carried loose in one hand and swinging to and fro with every stride. There could be no mistaking him.

The gigantic police dog kept pace with his speeding master, and by no seeming effort. His black-shadowed outlines reminded the two unseen watchers of the ancient drawings of the werewolf.

Enormous, noiseless, sinister, the two shadows crossed the little space of moonglow; and vanished.

With a deep sigh of relief, Donald Steele bent down and patted the fiercely straining collie.

"There!" he laughed, "that clears up the mystery. All this wild excitement and wild-goose-chase just because the evening air, back yonder,

brought you a whiff of Hunding's scent and Brand's. You had been turning over your clash with them in that queer collie brain of yours. And it occurred to you it would be fine to stalk them and bring the interrupted fight to a finish. Then, when you found I was following, you tried to urge me into the scrimmage, too. Miss Duff, I apologize to you! I've made you plod all this distance after a fool dog. And I told you he had some good reason for everything he did. Well, he hasn't. He had no sane reason for this exploit. I take back all I said about a collie having any mental ability at all."

He laughed again. And Elsie had the intuition to realize how great was his relief and how deep had been his worry about his adored brother. In the same vein, she made reply:

"Don't be too hard on poor Bronze! It was clever of him to come all this way after that German and his dog. Few bloodhounds could have carried the scent so far and have come up with them just as they happened to be crossing in front of us. The Scotch have a proverb that says: 'A collie has the brain of a man and the ways of a woman.' But I almost think a collie must have some of the queer 'sixth sense' that Highlanders are supposed to have."

"Bronze!" remarked Steele, leaning over the

dog, "she's saying all that just to console me for having such a blithering old idiot as yourself for a chum. . . . They've gone out of sight and out of reach by this time," he added, loosing his hold on the dog's ruff. "I think I can let you go without your dragging us into another noisy scrimmage."

"How fast they were going!" commented Elsie. "They seemed in a terrible hurry."

"Yes," assented Donald. "I've never seen Brand, before, when he wasn't moving at a stately military pace that covered the ground at the rate of less than two miles an hour. But, just now, he went like the wind. I wonder—"

"Oh, look at Bronze!" she interrupted.

The moon had risen above the ridge; and its beams were shining brightly along the dusty white road. Bronze was revealed just in front of his companions.

The collie had taken up his former queer gait and his tremors of muscle and sinew. Tense, eager, he was creeping along, every now and then lifting his nostrils to sniff the night air.

He was not going in the direction taken by Brand and Hunding, but was following his own former straight course.

"This ceases to be a joke!" declared Steele, annoyed. "I'll call him back and—"

"No," begged Elsie, strangely moved. "Don't.

Let him alone and let's follow him. It wasn't that German and the police dog that he was trailing at all. He just saw them by accident. Come on!"

She quickened her own step. His former anxiety pressing close upon him once more, Donald Steele caught up with her. Together they strode along, rapidly and wordless. And, ever just in front of them, moved the stealthily-creeping collie.

Then, of a sudden, as he neared the bend which they had been approaching, Bronze's attitude changed. He rose to his full stature and rounded the turn at a sweeping run.

It was as though he no longer merely feared or suspected or was goaded on by his Scottish sixth sense. For some reason, doubt had all at once merged into grim certainty.

By tacit consent the man and the girl broke into a run.

Bronze had vanished around the curve in the rutted by-road. As the humans followed, their ears were assailed once more by that hideous death-howl; which roared through the evening stillnesses like the voice of doom.

His heart constricted and his nerves in tatters, Steele shouted, angrily:

"Stop that abominable racket, you idiot! Shut up!"

As he shouted, he dashed around the bend, a few steps in advance of Elsie. Then, with such

suddenness as almost to throw him headlong, he checked his wild speed.

He checked it, in order to keep from falling over an obstacle in the narrow road.

There, at his feet, sprawled a black figure; lying athwart the white dust in a posture which Nature neither devises nor permits.

Above the body crouched Bronze. The collie's quest was finished. He had come to the end of the trail. He had found the Thing which his mystic collie nature had urged him to find.

There, in the full flood of new-risen Southern moonlight, lay the dead body of Eustace Steele.

Donald stood above it for an instant, petrified with horror. Then, instinctively, he sought to thrust Elsie back that she might not see it. But he was too late. Already the girl stood, shivering at his side.

Again Bronze lifted his pointed muzzle to the moon in the hideous death howl.

. . . . . .

The next half-hour was a numbed blur to Donald Steele. Never could he remember its events, in later days, except in fragmentary snatches.

Subconsciously, he went through the needful work of the moment. In his strong arms he lifted his dead brother's body to the empty truck, a few yards away. Elsie sat in the tonneau, supporting Eustace's head in her lap; and Bronze galloped

silently alongside as Steele put the vehicle to reckless top speed and drove to the nearest doctor, who was also county coroner.

The truck turned in at the physician's gateway just as the doctor himself was setting forth to keep a dinner engagement. He was displeased at the needful delay; and spoke and acted with a childish pettiness.

"This man is dead," he snapped, rising from his kneeling posture in the tonneau, after a brief examination. "He has been dead for fifteen or twenty minutes, at the very least. You say you brought him here from your wharf, at Beaulieu, in five minutes. He must have been dead before you found him. You have committed a grave breach of law, Mr. Steele. The law commands that you leave a murdered man in exactly the position you find him; until the coroner can view the—"

"Yes, and many an injured and supposedly dead man has lost his last chance of life through people obeying that idiotic early English statute!" flashed Elsie Duff, as Steele stared dazedly from the pettish little doctor to the still body of the brother who had been dearer to him than his own life. "Mr. Steele was perfectly right to bring him here. If there was one chance in a million that his brother was still alive, he—"

"There is no chance," said the doctor, disrelish-

ing her rebuke. "As I told you, he has been dead for at least twenty minutes. Perhaps longer."

He played his strong flashlight once more on the movelessly huddled form whose head rested in the girl's lap. And once more the electric radiance focused on the dead man's throat, to the right, just below the ear.

Here a tiny round hole, through the jugular, had let out the life. At the front, perhaps two inches from its point of entrance, the instrument which had caused the death had passed out, after drilling the jugular vein.

"A small caliber bullet," announced the doctor, "entering from the rear and passing out through the front. It traversed the jugular, without contact with any bone or even with any important muscle. Being undeflected, it continued its course and emerged in less than two inches, at this point."

He spoke with dry exposition, as if demonstrating some traumatic phenomenon to a clinic. His unemotional speech fell on his hearers' raw hearts like fist blows.

"The shot was fired at sufficient distance," resumed the doctor, quite immersed in his theme, "to prevent the presence of powder burns. But (as the bullet was very evidently of .22 caliber, from the size of its pattern, and as such bullets possess very low velocity, by reason of the light charge

behind them) it was fired from sufficiently near the victim to enable it to pierce the flesh and the jugular, without losing force or trajectory. However, these are points for the coroner's jury to hear. In the meantime—"

"Oh, *don't!*" pleaded Elsie, a catch in her sweet voice. "How can you stand like that and deliver a surgical lecture, while our friend is lying here? This is his brother—the brother who loved him!—"

"He was my brother," Donald Steele heard himself mutter, in a flat, dull voice. "And—and he's—he's dead."

"You have notified the police, of course?" queried the doctor, hectoringly. "That would be the correct and natural initial move, as soon as you discovered the—"

"We didn't!" broke in Elsie, while Steele continued to stare in owlish numbness at his tormentor. "Our only thought was to get him here; on the bare chance that there might still be a spark of life. Neither of us is an expert in such matters. We—"

"Permit me to say," coldly reproved the doctor, "that you made a vital error in not doing so. Valuable clews may have been accidentally or purposely eradicated during this delay. It was criminally careless of you both. It—"

"Oh!" flamed Elsie, in a whirlwind of tearful

indignation. "As if clews or police or anything else on earth mattered; so long as we thought there might be a fighting chance to save him! Can't you see, we—?"

The doctor was not listening. Turning to two negro man-servants who had come from the direction of the garage at sound of the excited voices, he said:

"Pick him up and bring him into my operating room. He can stay there until the inquest. That is where such sessions have been held," he explained to the others. "I'll call an inquest for nine in the morning. I notify you both, now, to be present at that hour. While they are carrying him in, I will telephone the police. Step lively, boys!"

The two negroes, with the superstitious dread of their race, hung back from obeying their employer's behest.

Donald Steele started from his daze of unbelieving horror.

"Wait!" he mumbled.

Stooping, he lifted Eustace's body once more in his powerful arms. Carrying him as tenderly and as easily as he would have carried a sleeping child, he bore him into the house and laid him lovingly on the couch in a room to which the physician had preceded him.

Elsie, following, saw Donald standing above his brother, his eyes wide and glassy, his dark visage

vacant, as he looked down into the cold white face. She stole up to him and slipped her little hand into his ice-chill fingers.

Donald did not so much as feel the comforting clasp. All he knew was that his brother was dead. And the knowledge drugged his brain.

So it is with a dangerously wounded man, in the first moments of his hurt. Afterward comes clearness of perception; and with it the anguish and mortal pain and delirium. Shock is merciful; whether to stricken soul or to stricken body.

Bronze, too, had followed, unnoticed, into the room. Gone was the strange spirit that had obsessed him for the past half hour. Head and brush drooping, he paced slowly to the couch; and looked long at the face of the man who lay there.

Then, moving to his master, he pressed close to Donald's knee, in silent sympathy. For, though the dog had loved Eustace, it was Donald Steele who was his god.

Thus the doctor found the three watchers as he came back from telephoning the police. His return aroused Donald once more from the blankness of grief. And, as often in such crises, Steele's mind fastened on a trivial detail.

"Doctor," he said, still in that vague, lifeless tone which was more like a sleep-talker's than a waking man's, "Miss Duff and her sister have been taking tea with—with us. Mrs. Gray will be wor-

ried at her sister's absence. There was a chauffeur in your car outside there. May I trouble you to have him drive Miss Duff to my house, and then take her and Mrs. Gray to the De Soto? I shall be grateful. I—I cannot take them home, myself. I—"

His voice trailed away.

"No!" exclaimed Elsie. "We are not going to leave you all alone in your desolate house like that. If ever you need a friend to help you, it is now. We are going to stay the night with you. We shan't be in your way. And we may be able to serve you somehow. *Please!*"

The man scarce heard. Once more he had sunk into his lethargy of sorrow. The doctor looked sharply at him, as the numbed brother stood staring so blankly down into Eustace's dead face. Then he nodded, curtly, to Elsie. His professional interest was stirred. He was not unused to such cases.

"My chauffeur will drive you both back to Steele's plantation," said he. "I'll give you some powders, too, for him. They may make him sleep. When he comes out of this semi-coma, he will need them."

Still walking as in his sleep, Donald Steele suffered himself to be guided by Elsie to the waiting car. In another ten minutes the car stopped at his own gate.

Mrs. Gray, awake from her nap, was on the veranda. At sight of the car she came running down to the gate. Elsie drew her aside; and in a few whispered words told the shocked older woman what had happened.

Together they went into the house to speak to the one servant in charge. Presently, Elsie came out again, alone, to the veranda.

She found Donald slumped low in a chair, in a flood of moonlight; Bronze lying at his feet. The collie's deep-set eyes were upraised to his master's white face in dumb appeal and sympathy. The girl seated herself beside Steele. For a few moments neither of them spoke. Then Donald said, as if in a dream:

"A small caliber bullet, through the jugular. . . . By that dim light, it must have been wonderful marksmanship. Or else a chance shot. And it wasn't a chance shot. . . . Bronze heard it, all this distance. Collies have hearing as keen as their scent. He knew what it meant, too. Though the Lord only knows how. . . . A .22 caliber bullet,—a crack shot. . . . *Brand!* . . . Oskar *BRAND!*"

"Yes," she murmured, soothingly, troubled at the sudden new life and pain in his last word—a word that was almost a cry of fury. "Yes, I know. I thought of it as soon as I saw the wound. And I whispered to the doctor about it before he telephoned the police. By this time they will be

after him. Don't think about it yet. Here, drink this!"

She proffered him a glass she had brought out with her; a glass of water in which was dissolved one of the powders the doctor had given her for him.

But Donald Steele did not hear her. He was coming back to his senses. The mist of numbness was lifting from his dazed brain. At that sudden thought which had flashed into his mind, the blankness fled.

Everything was dazzlingly clear to him now. Again he was himself. And, filling his whole heart and mind and body was a murderous obsession to meet Oskar Brand, face to face, foot to foot; and with his own naked hands to wreak vengeance for the dastardly slaying of his brother.

"From behind!" he raged, memory returning. "The doctor said the bullet entered his throat from *behind*. That means he was shot down in cold blood. Without a chance to defend himself or to look upon his killer. He—"

"Don't!" soothed Elsie. "You mustn't! Leave the law to punish him. The police are on his track already. Here, drink this—for *my* sake. Please! Then—"

The man's faculties were all centered upon his new discovery, and upon his fiery craving to avenge the death of his beloved brother. He could

not grasp any other impression or sensation. The words of the girl he loved went unheard. In the stress of the tumultuous moment, he had even forgotten she was beside him.

Through his hot brain darted the picture of Oskar Brand and Hunding, as their enormous silhouettes had topped the crest of the ridge at moonrise. He saw again the rapid pace of the wontedly slow Brand. He saw the loosely swung little rifle, —the rifle that had just slain Eustace—and the silent bulk of the huge police dog.

Scarce realizing what he did, Steele ran drunkenly down the veranda steps and along the path out to the road. Elsie called after him, but he did not hear nor heed. Bronze, at his master's first step, had jumped up, ready and eager to follow—to the end of the world, if need be.

Man and dog sped down the moonlit road and around a bend, out of the frightened girl's sight.

Steele knew every inch of the low-lying country from Beaulieu to Thunderbolt; and for miles to either side of them. He knew the ridge and he knew its end.

Toward this end, Brand and Hunding had been hastening. Steele guessed the cause of their haste. There was a bare chance he might reach the broken-down dock at the ridge's waterside edge before one of Brand's boats could respond to the

German's hail. And he strained every sinew in the fierce race, the great collie bounding at his side.

As he went, Donald's preternaturally alive brain pieced together what he sought to know of his enemy's probable move.

Brand had shot Eustace Steele—whether from ambush or after a new quarrel, or in fulfillment of his former threat to "get" Eustace. Then he had realized the body must soon be found. He knew his own threat was public property; and that he himself was the only man in the vicinity who made a habit of walking abroad with a rifle of the same caliber as the wound.

He dared not return home, lest the police catch him there. His booze-running vessels and their launches were forever plying the upper reaches of the river. Doubtless he knew one of them was likely to pass at about that hour. And he had hastened to the dock to intercept it.

Nobody knew where or how Brand spent his time in his long absences from home. And, once safe on one of his boats, he could defy the police of all Georgia to find him.

If only Steele could reach the tumble-down dock before the boat!

Donald's heart banged against his ribs; and his lungs labored almost to bursting as he forced his strong body to every notch of speed, in his mad race with luck.

He reached the ridge and swarmed up its rubbled side to the narrow path of its crest. Along this he sped toward the lean promontory at whose point was the dock.

With a leap, he cleared the ridge's abrupt end; and landed clatteringly on the dock's rotting boards. There, panting and staring, he stood.

The race was over.

The dock stood empty.

Then, to his ears came the soft purr of a motor-boat engine. Wiping the sweat from his blood-shot eyes, Steele peered out across the expanse of moonlit water.

A quarter-mile offshore rode a low steam-yacht. She was not anchored; but was hove to, as though a hail had checked her progress.

Midway between yacht and shore, a dark little shape bobbed in the track of sparkling moonlight.

It was a tiny motor boat—such as serves often for the shore boat of a small pleasure-yacht. The boat was making top speed for the waiting yacht.

Bronze, pausing beside his master, sniffed the air. Then, from his shaggy throat, burst a volley of menacing barks. So might a dog bark execration at escaped prey.

Across the still water, in reply, came a wild-beast snarl.

Hunding had heard the challenge and was answering it, after his own fashion.

A word of angry rebuke, in German, silenced the police dog's snarl. And Donald Steele knew the voice.

In impotent fury he shook his fists high in air, at the distant boat.

"I'll find you!" he thundered. "I'll *find* you and I'll *kill* you—as certain as there's a God in heaven! You'll pay the blood-bill, if I have to track you to the world's end! *You'll pay it!*"

He paused, panting and raging. From far across the still waters, he could fancy he heard a guttural chuckle of derision at his crazy threat.

Chapter III

THE plane seemed to be buzzing through the calm upper air with the drowsy ease and safety of a giant dragonfly.

But, as every airman knows, there is no absolute ease or safety in flying. The currents of even the crankiest patch of ocean or river are absurdly simple by comparison with the currents and cross-currents of air which lace the upper atmosphere.

To make the risk worse, there are "holes" in such atmosphere through which an unwary pilot's plane may drop to destruction as readily as a boat could be sucked down through a great whirlpool hole.

There were two figures in the plane. One was that of a leather-clad and goggled man. The other was a shaggy dog.

Both had become familiar to winter residents of southern Florida and of the Bahamas and of Cuba. For they were indefatigable aeronauts. For no known purpose, except pleasure, they had been quartering the Florida and Bahama waters and the Caribbean for months.

Some thrifty folk hinted the aviator was perhaps a little insane to be wasting so much time in

such idle flights. These folk wondered at the big collie's unwearying devotion to his eccentrically lazy master.

One resort newspaper had referred to the two as "Donald Steele, King of the Air; And His 'Sky' Terrier." The same paper had somehow dug out the information that Steele was a former ace who had settled down to peach-farming in Georgia at the close of the war; and who, tiring of such humdrum occupation, had bought an old war plane for the purpose of spending a season in cruising above Southern waters.

Nothing in Steele's manner bore out the theory that he was eccentric or in any way lacking in mental balance. Between trips, he left his plane at the hangar near Coconut Grove; and made the Royal Palm Hotel, at Miami, his headquarters. There, he was merely a quiet and unassuming guest; mingling little in the jolly life of the hotel, but in no sense a recluse.

There was a shadow of sadness, at times, on his lean and dark face. But that might well be accounted for by an undefined rumor that he had lost his only brother by some sort of violent death, less than a year before, in Georgia.

To-day, he was headed back for Miami, after a week's air cruise among the thousands of islands that form the Bahama group.

Donald had not intended to return so soon to

Florida. But his elderly plane had been sorely strained in a sub-tropic hurricane, before he could make a landing at Bimini. There, an Aeromarine Company's pilot had helped him patch up the slightly damaged machine; but had cautioned him against making the trip back to the mainland with it.

Disregarding this counsel, and confident in his plane's stability, Donald made the trip. His only concession was to bear a little more to westward than usual, in order to favor the ill-mended machine in its contact with the trade-winds. As a result, instead of crossing Biscayne Bay, as usual, between Miami Beach and Cape Florida, he first soared above shore; not far below Fort Lauderdale.

This meant the need of a crosscut, over ground, instead of over water, in order to reach his hangar. He chose the short cut gladly. For his engine was beginning to miss. And he was not at all certain of the mended propeller's stanchness. The sooner he could land, the better; both for himself and for Bronze. The nameless aviator-instinct told him so.

But his landing was to be earlier and more abrupt than he had planned.

With no warning, the patched propeller snapped. The wrench threw the defective engine out of business. To a veteran of fifteen air-battles, this meant not an augmented pulse-beat, nor a throb of fear. Steele's only emotion was one of annoy-

ance at thought of having to send a wrecking crew to take the plane back to the hangar. Then he proceeded to volplane earthward.

Beneath him, and just in front stretched a pine barren, of perhaps ten acres, from which the trees had been cut, but which still held a goodly amount of palmetto scrub and a stump or so. Paralleling this was a sandy byroad, which turned off, at right angles, from the gray concrete State Highway.

The pine barren ended in a wide bar of lush dark green vegetation, bordering a twenty-foot creek. Steele was as familiar with the creek as with other narrow streamlets of its kind which intersect Southern Florida. Black, deep, sluggish, they wind their picturesquely sinister way through double ranks of jungle-like tree and shrub, which shroud the dark water with an eternal canopy of leafage and vine.

Down into the smoothest-appearing part of the denuded pine barren Donald Steele volplaned. But a mischief-making little back-current of air gave his plane a parting slap as it swooped.

Instead of striking earth at the smooth space aimed for by Steele, the machine landed many yards beyond; and in a hummocky reach of sand. There, had the ground served, the plane's wheels might have sped along for some distance and have come to an easy stop. But neither the nature of the terrain nor the distance would permit of this.

The machine had struck the barren, uncomfortably close to the wall of lush verdure bordering the creek. Also, sand on one side and an outcrop of coral rock on the other, played havoc with Steele's attempt to steer the grounded plane to safety.

Forward it whizzed at top speed—forward and sidewise. In front—perilously near—was the fringe of trees with the deep waters of the creek behind it.

To one side was a heap of wind-piled sand. Donald sought to twist his runaway plane into the sand-heap. But with the first wrench, on striking ground, the steering-gear had gone clean out of commission. On rushed the machine at the trees which loomed just in front.

With a final effort, Donald Steele caught the indignantly astonished Bronze by the scruff of the neck and pitched him, by main force, at the sand-pile. Then, bracing himself, he sought to follow the collie to that soft landing place.

But he was a fraction of a second too slow. A wheel smote against the outcropping top of a pine stump. The machine bucked. Donald Steele shot through the air as if fired from the muzzle of a siege-gun.

An automobilist bowling along the gray State Highway had seen the plane as it began its earthward dip, and had turned into the narrow byway,

paralleling the creek, stepping on the accelerator and urging the automobile to its utmost pace.

But neither Steele nor Bronze could note this evidence of interest in the plight of themselves and their plane.

Bronze alighted with a thump in the heart of the sand pile. The breath knocked out of him, but otherwise unhurt, the collie scrambled to his feet and sought to locate his master. There was no sign of Donald, nor of the machine.

The plane, striking the pine-stump, had turned clean over, somersault-fashion, tumbling headlong into the mass of creekside foliage which swallowed every vestige of it.

Donald shot forward, at express-train speed, through the air, crashing through the screen of leaves and branches; and coming to a sprawling halt at the creek's brink. A tap over the head, from a branch, as he whizzed past, had stunned him.

The padded leathern helmet saved the skull from fracture and the flesh from contusion and averted any worse injury than momentary unconsciousness. But, so far as the effects of the flight through the undergrowth was concerned, the blow might almost as well have been fatal.

For the senseless man came to earth amid the creekside vines with his head and shoulders underneath the black water. And there he lay.

His back and one arm and all his lower body were on shore. But his head and one arm and both shoulders were immersed.

His senses crept back to him. He took a deep breath. At once his throat and lungs felt as though they were on fire. Strangulation's agony brought him back to his full faculties in a flash. For that deep breath had inhaled a goodly quality of warm and smelly and stagnant creek water.

Before he could move, something had caught him by the arm which was still above water. And a tugging force was trying to draw him back.

Bronze, reaching the bank a second or so behind his master, had come upon Donald lying thus. The dog's scent and eyes and instinct had grasped something even less reassuring.

For, at the same moment, a scaly gray-black log had detached itself from the shadows of the opposite bank and had swung around in mid-stream, gathering itself for a rush at the unconscious man whose upper body had invaded its domain.

The dog seized Donald's elbow and, with frantic force, yanked backward to pull him from the imminent peril. His braced feet slipping in the creekside mud, the collie hauled in delirious eagerness.

But even the strongest dog is hard put to it to draw an inert hundred-and-sixty-pound body up a steep bank. And Bronze made scant progress.

Yet the grip of his teeth, through coat and shirt did as much to rouse the man as did the strangling water in his throat. And Donald Steele struggled to lift his face out of the choking liquid in which his fall had doused it.

But, quickly as he scrambled up, he was not quite quick enough.

The grayish and slimy loglike thing from across the creek had succeeded in swinging its bulky form around. Now, with a hissing rush through the still water, it hurled itself toward the helpless man.

And, in the less shadowy light of midstream, the indistinct shape resolved itself into a nine-foot alligator—one of those lurkingly murderous saurians which are still to be found, now and then, in the lower reaches of the sluggish and foliage-hidden South Florida creeks.

The creature had been sulking in the shade of the bank. The jarring crash of the plane's impact with the shrubbery had roused it from its nap, and it had awakened both hungry and wrathful. Then, directly in front of it, had appeared the moveless body of a man who had invaded its grewsome lair—a man who sprawled within easy reach of the terrible jaws.

With a rush that lifted its serrated head far above water, the alligator swirled at Steele.

Anguished at his own slowness in drawing his

master out of the path of certain death, Bronze beheld the rush. There was but one thing to do, and Bronze did it. He had but one life to offer in defence of the man who was his god. Unhesitatingly, blithely, the collie threw that life into the balance.

Dropping his futile grip on Steele's elbow, he sprang forward, hackles abristle, teeth bared, waking the echoes with a fanfare of battle-barks.

Now, no one collie, not any fifty collies, can hope to match a single alligator in the latter's element of stagnant water. No animal, moreover, is more helpless against attack than is a swimming dog. Not being a fool, Bronze must have known all this. Yet, not for an instant did he hesitate.

With all his might he launched himself over the bank and out into deep water at one wild bound. His body struck the creek with a resounding splash directly in the path of the onrushing alligator.

That spectacular and noisy splash, almost in his very face, checked momentarily the saurian's dash. So intent had he been upon the man that he had not noticed the dog. Now, the splashing advent of this new victim into the creek's slimed waters deflected the rush. But only for a second.

In that second, Donald Steele succeeded in rearing his own drenched head above the surface, expelling the ill-flavored water from his mouth and

throat and blinking to clear his eyes. Instinctively, he grasped a creek-side bush, to haul himself farther ashore. And it was then his blurred gaze fell upon the sight directly in front of him.

The alligator, like a curveting horse, had whirled to one side, as the splashing body had smitten the water in front of it. Now, as the collie's head emerged above the surface, the alligator abandoned his plan to assail the man and launched itself at this nearer and easier prey.

Bronze, seemingly fated but wholly unafraid, swam valiantly to meet his foe. His head and shoulders above water, he rushed forward, dead at the gaping jaws that opened to engulf him. So much Donald Steele saw, through the mist of water that streamed down from his soaked hair and helmet. Not realizing what he did, he shouted to the dog by name. Then he gathered himself for a plunge toward his imperilled chum. He had no clear idea how he might rescue the collie or even how he might hope to avert death from himself. But, at once, he realized that Bronze was voluntarily staking life for him. And he resolved to share the peril.

The sound of Donald's voice had a startling effect on the dog. It told him Steele was no longer lying there helpless and drowning, unable to fend for himself against the hideous peril which menaced him.

As I have said, Bronze was anything but a fool. While he had been willing and eager to throw away his own life in defense of his god, yet he saw no sense in continuing to throw it away, now that Steele was apparently safe.

In mid rush—the alligator's wide jaws not three feet from him—Bronze swerved sharply to one side with a suddenness that wrenched every mighty muscle in his body. It was a bit of footwork worthy a lightweight champion. And it served its purpose.

Past him tore the shining bulk of the alligator, hurled onward by its own heavy impetus. Belatedly, the saurian observed Bronze's sidestep. And, as he slithered past, the enormous jaws twisted to one side and snapped.

The movement was incredibly quick for so unwieldy a brute. And it all but achieved its deadly purpose.

The jaws came together with a clack like that of plank dropped on plank. They missed the collie's beautiful head by less than an inch.

Past the dog swept the loglike body; the tail smiting at him in passing. Bronze was too close to the scaly side of his enemy for the tail to strike with any semblance of its wonted force. Otherwise, every bone in Bronze's gallant body must have been crushed. For the blow of an angry alli-

gator's tail is thrice as formidable as the kick of a horse.

But, as with the kick of a horse, it loses most of its effect when there is no distance for it to travel before it hits its mark. Even as a blacksmith steps close to a kicking horse whose heels he cannot dodge, so the nearness of Bronze's body to the flailing blow of the tail saved the dog from instant death.

Nevertheless, the blow was forceful enough to drive the dog's struggling body far under water.

This, too, helped in the saving of him. For, wheeling about as swiftly as his great size would permit, the alligator lunged back to the charge only to find the dog had vanished.

In the instant before he could dive in search of him, in the bare instant longer before Bronze's wet head reappeared above the surface, Donald Steele went into action.

The man's groping fingers had closed upon a joist of driftwood that had come to rest at the creek's brink. Swinging this aloft, he strode breast deep into the creek and smote with all his wiry strength and trained skill. He struck full across the alligator's tiny lidless eyes.

He might as well have hammered the staff across the face of a bowlder.

The might of the blow numbed his arm to the shoulder. It broke the water-logged bludgeon into

three pieces. But its sole effect upon the alligator was to turn the creature's attention momentarily from the dog back to the man.

The flaring jaws swung wide—revealing a tremendous expanse of pink-yellow mouth and throat and double rows of saw-teeth. Steele strove to lurch to one side from the oncoming horror. His footing slipped on the creek's miry bottom, and he floundered forward on his face in deep water.

As he fell, he shut his eyes and held his breath. For the charging saurian was almost upon him, and the open jaws had but to close on his head.

An instant's weakness of utter despair mastered him. Then, at once, his pluck came back to him. With a down stroke of both hands, he brought his head above the water that he might at least face this nightmare form of death in his own element and look it bravely in the face as a white man should.

But, in the tiny interim of time that he had been submerged, the battle had taken a new and inexplicable turn. The moment lost by his toppling forward had been more than enough to allow the alligator's snapping jaws to close upon him. But they had not closed upon him. Indeed, they had not closed at all.

All the creek had turned into something that was a blend of Niagara Falls and a cloudburst.

The water was churning, from bank to bank, in a smother of flung spray. A whirlpool was eddying with unbelievable velocity, all but knocking Donald off his precarious foothold in the creek-bottom slime. Painfully sharp cracking sounds beat upon his eardrums.

Then, as he gouged the blinding water from his eyes, he saw the cause of the creek's cyclone antics.

The alligator was thrashing about, like a ship-propeller, churning the waters to a froth with his hammering tail. And there were flecks of blood in the creamy froth.

Steele got a fugacious glimpse at the jaws that had threatened him. The jaws were still flaring wide open. But now they were open in a fury of pain, not of destruction. And their unwholesome pinkish interior was tinged with scarlet.

From the bank behind Steele came a final repetition of the loud cracking sounds which had pierced through his helmet pads and to his clogged hearing.

With that final report, the alligator gave a more devastating heave of the gleaming dark body. The tail whacked the churned water with a last showering impact, and the immense brute sank sullenly from sight into the black depths of mid-creek. He had had enough.

Bronze dragged himself up the steep and slippery bank; shaking the water out of his shaggy

coat. He was panting and exhausted, but he was unhurt. Steele noticed with wonder that he was making for the bank top instead of coming over to greet his wet master. And the man's eyes followed the direction his collie was taking.

There on the summit of the bank, amid the thick foliage, stood a girl. In one hand she still held a small pistol. From its blackened muzzle crawled a thin reek of smoke. A scent of burnt powder tainted the air.

At last Steele understood the meaning of the repeated loud cracking sounds, which had been assailing his ears ever since his head had emerged from the water; and which evidently had begun while he was still immersed.

He understood, too, how the alligator's mouth-cavern chanced to be reddened and why the brute had thrashed about in such torture.

The five or six pistol-balls had been planted in the one vulnerable part of the saurian's armored body. While they had not had the force to kill him, yet they had caused him untold agony and had made him give up the battle.

"I think," said Steele, dizzily, as he clambered out of the water and up the bank toward his rescuer, "I think you have just saved Bronze and myself from losing our heads—literally. You must have fired the first shot just as I went under and just as he was grabbing for me. That was what

kept his jaws from shutting around my neck. . . . Thanks."

Then, aware of the incompleteness of his language, he checked himself.

The water was cleared from his eyes by an impatient sweep of his hand which stemmed for an instant the rivulets which were trickling down his forehead from under his helmet. And he looked into the face of the woman whose timely advent and steady aim had rescued him from a namelessly terrible form of death.

"Miss—Miss Duff!" he stammered.

Then he fell silent. After nearly a year he was staring at the girl he loved—the girl he had tried so vainly to forget—the girl who was so close-linked with the one great tragedy of his life.

It seemed impossible. The long arm of coincidence seemed stretched beyond all normal bounds in this miracle. That he and she should have met again in this way—that she had arrived here at the acme of his life-peril and should have saved him—it did not make sense. His mind whirled at the incomprehensible wonder of it all.

And, even as he stared, he was aware that he was dwelling on the dainty beauty of her; that his hungry eyes were studying every detail of the face which had refused to leave his memory. At his heart there was a strange stirring.

It was she who broke the silence.

"You aren't hurt?" she asked, anxiously. "Oh, you're sure you aren't hurt? He didn't—?"

"No," he made answer. "Thanks to you. If you hadn't—"

"And the splendid brave dog!" she cried, stooping to stroke Bronze's wet head as he stood looking up at her. "Thank God I got here in time! I— See!" she broke off, as if seeking a less vital subject. "I really believe he remembers me."

"A collie doesn't forget," said Donald. "Tell me—I can't try to thank you for what you've done—tell me, how did you happen to drop out of the sky just now in the nick of time? It isn't logical, somehow. It doesn't seem real. It—"

"It was you that 'dropped out of the sky,'" she answered him, "not I. And it was perfectly logical. There was no mystery about it. Not even a coincidence. My sister and myself came South again this winter. In fact, we've been in the South, here and there and off and on ever since—ever since—"

She went on, skirting the unhappy theme:

"We reached Miami, a week ago, by motor. We're stopping at the Royal Palm. I found you were stopping there, too. An hour or two ago, one of the guests who had just come across from Bimini told me you were tinkering with your plane, there, and that you were going to try to fly across to the mainland in spite of the Aeromarine pilot's advice."

"I—"

"I was motoring out toward Fort Lauderdale," she went on, "and I saw your plane. It seemed to be in distress. Then I saw you begin to volplane toward a pine barren where nobody would land by choice. And I turned in at the side road to see if I could be of any use in case of accident. There's my car over yonder. I saw you crash through the trees, and I ran to the bank. I was just in time to—"

She shuddered, at memory of what she had witnessed and what she had averted.

"I always carry this little gun when my sister and I take long motor trips, alone, together," she added. "I'm glad I happened to slip it in my pocket when I started out this morning. I—You're sure the fall didn't harm you? Oh, it was *awful* to watch! I saw you pitch Bronze into that sand hill. Then I saw him dash after you. If—if—"

To Steele's amazement, the self-controlled girl suddenly buried her face in her little gloved hands and burst into a tempest of weeping.

The man yearned to gather her into his arms and to comfort her as he would have comforted a frightened and overwrought child. She was so small, so fragile, so ineffably lovable! It tore at Donald's heart to see her cry.

He took a hesitant step toward her, his arms

half outstretched. But all at once she was herself again.

"I'm sorry!" she said, raising her tear-stained face to his, in childlike plea for pardon at her momentary weakness. "I didn't know I was going to break down and be a baby. But one can't be strong and resourceful every single minute. Can one? Not at twenty-two, anyhow. And, all at once, it came over me—that fearful creature bearing down on you—and you so helpless against him —and—"

"There! There!" he soothed, clumsy in his stark earnestness. "Don't let yourself think of it. It's all right. Thanks to you. It's all right, I tell you! Don't think of it any more. It—"

"Not 'think of it any more!'" she echoed. "Why, I suppose I'll dream of it every night for a month! No, I won't, either," she caught herself up. "I'm not going to be silly. I promise. Now, let's see about getting you back to the hotel. You can send out and have the plane—or what's left of it—carted back to town. You must get to your room and get some dry clothes. Why, you're drenched to the skin! Take off that helmet. It must have a gallon of water in it. And at least a pint of it cascades down over your face every time you move your head."

Scolding him prettily, like some fussy little mother, she issued her commands. And, rejoicing

in the new phase of her nature, he obeyed, with due meekness; realizing she was using this means to mask her own nervousness until she could steady herself. It was sweet to be ordered about by a woman, again—and tenfold so by a woman he loved.

At her behest, he undid and removed the sodden helmet; and searched the wrecked plane for his hand bag and slicker.

"Now," she continued, "I'm going to motor you back to the hotel. Come along. I suppose you'll get the car frightfully wet. But it can't be helped."

She led the way to her automobile. As they reached it and he helped her aboard, she said:

"You're thinner and—and you're ever so much older, too, than when I saw you before."

Then, seeming to understand she was treading on dangerous ground, she said, with a return of her maternal manner:

"Let Bronze lie in the tonneau, and you sit in front here with me. This dress is only an old dud, anyhow. I don't care if it gets mud and creek water on it from sitting next to you. Do—do you suppose I killed him?"

"Not likely," replied Steele, getting into the seat she indicated. "But you certainly hurt him a lot. And you made him lose all interest in tackling Bronze and me. That was the main thing. It

isn't probable that such a small-caliber gun would kill—"

He broke off, in sudden recollection. Nor, for a minute, did Elsie speak, but busied herself with getting the car in motion and piloting it out of the sand lot.

Each knew what was in the other's mind. Each knew the thoughts aroused in the other by the inadvertent mention of killing by means of a small-caliber weapon.

It was Elsie who broke the brief spell of wordlessness which had settled between them. Now that both had come to the verge of the subject that was most poignant in their hearts, there was no question of talking further on smugly indifferent topics.

"He was never arrested," she said in a low voice. "I know that. For I kept in touch with all news of the case. But have you ever had any clew?"

"Clew?" he repeated, bitterly. "A million clews. All of them false trails. Most of them invented by Oskar Brand, himself, or by some of his hangers-on. He never came back to Beaulieu, of course. His house and its outbuildings were searched. No trace of him was found. But there were traces—and damning proofs—all over the place, that it was the Georgia headquarters of the bootleg traffic. Yes, and that he was the chief of

the whole industry there. But perhaps you read of that. It all came out in the papers."

"Yes," she said, quietly, "I read about it. I read everything I could lay hands on. I read how the revenue agents prided themselves on having discovered his headquarters and on breaking up the illicit liquor traffic there, and—"

"Breaking it up!" scoffed Donald. "It was like breaking up a local sickness by scattering it over the whole body. Brand shifted his headquarters and his hiding place to some spot nobody has been able to find. And it's said he has increased the traffic and his own power and wealth tenfold since he was driven out of Georgia. He's supposed to be the mysterious Bootleg King the government has heard so much about. They say he has hundreds of people in his employ, and that he pulls the strings, from his hiding place, that control thousands more law-breakers. It is an enormous syndicate now, with Brand at the head of it. And with more than one bank and government official in his pay. He wields more power than the kings of petty states used to wield in his own Germany. No wonder the whole Secret Service is after him!"

"The Secret Service is after him?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes, and a half-dozen other branches of the government. And that's all the good it does them.

They get clew after clew and trace after trace. But every clew leads to a blind alley. At one moment they are sure he is in Canada; and there's talk of invoking the Dominion's help in catching him. The next day, some one turns up who saw Brand strolling down the Prado, in Havana, with that huge police dog, Hunding, at his heels. A day or so later, he's proven to be in Glasgow or Dublin, looking after the export end of his booze consignments. In fact he's supposed to be anywhere and everywhere except where he really is."

He spoke with bitter indignation. She eyed him curiously. He read her look.

"Yes," he said, simply. "I'm after him. I shall keep after him till he or I die. I swore it the night Eustace was killed by him. I suppose that sounds melodramatic. But most of the big things in life are melodramatic. I was crazed with grief at my brother's death. And I was crazed with fury at Brand. And I screeched to him, as he was escaping, that I'd track him down. He laughed back at me. That laugh made me sane. I laid my plans, and I began my search. I am still searching. I shall find him. I am playing a lone hand. And I am going to win. I don't know how I know that. But I *do* know."

She did not look at him as he finished speaking and turned again to her. Twice she seemed about to speak. But, twice, she checked herself.

"Miss Duff," said Steele, suddenly, "I raged up and down the river shore, that evening, till I found an old motorboat that had been left there for the night by some duck-hunters. I took it and gave chase to Brand's yacht. A wheelbarrow might as well have chased a racing car. I stranded on a sandbar downstream, and I was stuck there till a fisherman towed me ashore at daybreak. I went straight to my house. You remember Eustace and myself used to call it The House of Peace? Well, it had become the House of Desolation. I hoped you and Mrs. Gray might still be there, but you had gone."

He spoke almost as if in accusal. She did not reply. He went on:

"The inquest had been called for nine o'clock, you remember. The coroner had ordered us both to be on hand as witnesses. I drove to the De Soto to take you out to the inquest. They told me at the desk that you and Mrs. Gray had been called home unexpectedly, and that you had gone North by the eight o'clock train. From that day till now I haven't seen or heard of you. Was it fair to leave me in the lurch like that? Eustace was your friend. To make no inquiry—to send me no word—! Forgive me if I speak strongly about it. But I feel strongly. It would have been such a little thing for you to—"

"I can't explain," she said, almost in a whisper.

"I have no right to explain. I know—I knew, then—how my going away like that must appear to you. I can't even ask you to trust me, after I—"

"You don't have to ask me to trust you!" he interrupted, his earnestness making his voice and manner rough. "You don't have to. I do trust you. And—in spite of my common sense I trusted you all along. You needn't explain anything at all, unless you want to. I trust you. And I'll keep on trusting you till they throw the three handfuls of earth on me. Let it go at that!"

Impulsively she released one of her hands from the steering wheel and laid it in his calloused palm. His fingers closed over it with a grip whose adoring pressure all but made her wince.

"Elsie!" he began, fervidly. *"Elsie!* I—"

"There is one thing I *can* tell you," she said, putting her tingling hand back on the steering wheel as the car rounded a turn on the outskirts of Miami. "No, there are two things. One is that I know why you are posing as a lazy and eccentric aeronaut; and cruising over the Bahamas all the time. It is because you believe Oskar Brand has his headquarters in that maze of thousands of islands. It all came to me, like a revelation, as soon as some people at the Royal Palm told me about you. You are on the man-hunt."

"Yes," he said, simply. "I am. And, more than

that, I am on the trail. The trail I believe is the right one."

"That was one of the things I said I could tell you," she continued. "The other is this: For nearly a year I have been following the same man-hunt. And at last, after dozens of false twists, it has brought me down here. I—"

"Elsie!"

"You are not the only one who took solemn oath to find Oskar Brand and punish him," she said, her sweet voice shot by a tone of iron. "There! Now we have each other's secrets. Shall we work together—to the end of the trail—Donald? Shall we?"

"Yes!" he cried, aflame. "*Yes!* YES!"

He felt and looked transfigured as he turned to her.

"You don't even ask why I should be doing this," she reminded him. "Doesn't it seem at all odd to you that I should be following the man-hunt, too? You haven't asked me why. Since we are to work together, I must tell you that, too."

He blinked at her in wonder. Instinctively he felt his momentary flush of happiness ebb.

"Suppose," she told him, her face once more averted. "Suppose a woman loves a man—suppose she is engaged to him—that she is soon to be his wife—and that he is killed. Well, she can either nurse her heartbreak in a maudlin way or

she can devote her own life to tracking and punishing the murderer of her lover. Now, do you understand, Donald?"

"Yes," he made heavy answer; after a long pause during which his life-hopes crumbled to ashes. "Yes, little sister. Now I—I understand."

Again his hand met hers, this time lightly and in the briefest of clasps.

"We are partners, now, you and I," she said, softly. "And together we shall win."

"Yes," he assented, his jaw tightening again in resolution. "We shall win!"

Chapter IV

"IT'LL be two weeks before my plane can be put in shape again," reported Donald Steele, as he joined Elsie on the hotel veranda after dinner that evening. "That means two weeks of sitting with folded hands and doing not a blessed thing. And, just as I hoped I had a bare chance, too!"

"Can't you charter a boat?" she asked. "That was what I thought of doing. I thought I'd make a cruise among the Bahamas—supposedly a fishing trip, though I never caught a fish in my life. I thought perhaps—"

"It would be useless," he said. "Nobody who hasn't flown over the Bahamas has the faintest idea of them. They're a shad-roe of islands, scattered over hundreds of miles, some only a few hundred feet apart and some miles away from one another. There are more than three thousand of them. They run in size from the big fellows like New Providence and Andros down to little coral reefs no bigger than a city backyard. And they're laced by a million queer currents that tangle up a boat's course. Why, you could cruise through them for a year without knowing them."

"Then—"

"I've flown over them, from end to end, a score of times," he continued. "And I've studied them, from above, as we used to be taught to study the country we flew over in France and Flanders. I've photographed on my brain every possible aspect of them. And I've made sheafs of notes and pored over the government hydrographic charts. And at the end of it all, I feel I haven't even scratched the surface. The Bahamas are Islands of Mystery. Some of them are inhabited. Most of them aren't. They were thrown up by the sea in all kinds of queer shapes and sizes and substances. Some of them are mud-heaps, hardened. Some are made up of precipices. Some are honeycombed with caves. And—"

"Caves!" she echoed. "Do you—?"

"That's what gave me my idea. I believe there is some island there with caves in it big enough to store millions of gallons of booze. I believe it is in those caves that Brand keeps his stock of liquor hidden after he gets it from England or Nassau or Canada or Cuba; and before he can get it distributed."

"Then it ought to be easy to—"

"Ought it? To find one island out of more than three thousand? An island he has chosen because it is so inaccessible and so impossible to find? Why, hunting the proverbial needle in a haystack

is like solving a kindergarten puzzle compared to that! I have been quartering the islands for six months. I have divided them into sections and gone over every section with a fine-tooth comb. But I can't find the right island. I've hired a small boat at Andros and again at the Big Isaacs and gone to a dozen of the cave islands. But they weren't any of them the one I'm looking for."

"You went—alone?"

"I told you I play a lone hand."

"But if you *had* found the right one? It would have been guarded. You'd have been overpowered—perhaps killed—"

"It was worth that much risk. Especially, if Oskar Brand's hiding place had happened to be there, too. You can't carry on the man-hunt without some slight risks, you know. That's why I want you to let me do the active part of the work now we're in partnership on this."

"Apparently there isn't going to be any 'active part' to it for the present," she complained. "Miami is a delightful place to loaf in. But when one wants to do anything rather than loaf—"

"Don't waste your energies and nerves in worrying over that," he adjured. "Many a good horse has lost a race because he fretted his nerves to ribbons at the post. The best disguise one can have is the cloak of laziness. Brand can't know you're interested in finding him. But if any of his

people have happened to spot *me,* here, all they can say is that I'm doing nothing but buzz around aimlessly in my old plane—the same one Brand used to see me flying aimlessly about with back in Georgia."

"Speaking of planes," said Elsie, "there's an aviator here with a six-passenger seaplane. His name is Ellman. He runs individual flights in competition with the Aeromarine. He—"

"Yes, I've met him. I've seen his plane, too. I don't think a great deal of either of them. Not that I know anything against them. The man's all right, I suppose. He had a good war-record, they tell me. And his plane is a 'built over.' It's made lots of trips this season. So, presumably, it's sound. Why?"

"He's been trying to get up a trip that doesn't go just to Bimini or as far as Nassau; but cruises over some of the nearer islands beyond both Biminis. I heard about him, and last evening I looked him up at his office. He is planning a trip for to-morrow. But he had only two passengers, and he needs three more, he says, before he can make it pay. I booked my sister and myself, but Grace backed out. So he still needs two, unless he's gotten more during the day. Would you care to come along?"

"Indeed I would," assented Steele, eagerly. "It'll make it seem more real, and you'll under-

stand it better, after we've been over some of the nearer islands together. How long did he say it'd take?"

"About an hour and a half each way, he said. If—"

"H'm! That means about twenty-five or thirty miles beyond Bimini. Right in the nearer network of islands. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was afraid it would seem tame to you after your own long flights. Like ping-pong to a major league ball player. I'm so glad you'll go! Now he lacks only one more passenger to make up the five."

"No," corrected Steele. "He has the five. Because I'm going to take Bronze along. He is crazy about flying. If I left him alone here while I went on a ride like that he'd never forgive me. So Bronze goes. Give me Ellman's phone number and I'll call him up now."

"I don't think he has a phone. It's a little cubby-hole of an office just off Flagler Avenue. I can tell you how to get there if you care to go across on the chance of his office still being open."

With Bronze at his heels, Donald Steele crossed Royal Palm Park, and in another five minutes was at the door of the shabby alcove where the aviator had desk room. Ellman, a scrawny young man in a sand-colored linen suit, was closing his desk for the night when Steele came in.

The two had met casually once or twice at the aviation field at Hialeah, and now their greetings were civil, if not cordial. Steele explained his errand, and booked places for Bronze and himself in the "Independent Air Line's" one plane, *Sky Lady*.

"I'll be ready, off Burgess Dock, at nine in the morning," promised Ellman as his guest turned to go. "Burgess will bring you out in one of his motorboats. Sorry to hear your old war plane went blooey to-day. Lucky you weren't hurt."

"Thanks," said Steele, adding: "Who are the two other passengers?"

Ellman grinned reminiscently.

"Two born vaudeville screams," he said. "I'm glad you and Miss Duff are going along, to keep the trip from looking like a hay-ride out in the backwoods. One of the two others is a fussy little old woman,—a Mrs. Hyle, who came here from up in New Hampshire somewhere on a visit to her married daughter, and who says she wants to tell the folks back home how she flew to British possessions in a real airship. She picked me out, instead of the Aeromarine crowd, because I'm cheaper and because she wanted to go farther than Bimini and not as far as Nassau. The other passenger is a lanky, leathery old ex-farmer, named Agar. He chose *Sky Lady* for the same reason. Said he could get forty minutes more action for

two dollars less than the Aeromarine charges. He's one of the bunch who travel a thousand miles South for the sake of spending his days pitching quoits or playing checkers in Royal Palm Park. He fell in talk with me one day as he was leaving the checker-benches out there, and I got him interested in a flight."

"Are you planning to land anywhere?" asked Steele.

"No. There's no place, except Bimini or Nassau, with anchorage and boats for it. But we'll only be in the air about two hours and a half. Get you back in time for lunch. Good night. And thanks."

Steele made his way across the crowded roadway of Flagler Avenue, then skirted the park where the band concert was in full swing, and entered the dim avenue of Australian pines which led back to the hotel.

He was in no hurry to rejoin Elsie Duff. For there was more pain now than pleasure in his association with her.

During the black months of his absence from the girl, he had carried far down in his heart the faint hope that some day he might find her again and might win her love. He had told himself over and over that she could not possibly have cared for Eustace or she would not have fled from Savannah and left no word.

How had she taken the first shock of finding Eustace dead? Steele could never remember; for his own mind, just then, had been in dizzy turmoil. He had been as one in delirium until his pursuit of Brand along the ridge had jerked him back to vengeful sanity. Then, on his return home at dawn, he had found Elsie and Mrs. Gray gone. Surely, if she had cared for Eustace she would at least have paid her lover the last poor respect of staying for his funeral!

So Donald had argued a thousand times. And the thought had cheered him throughout his months of loneliness and of patient search for his brother's slayer. Some day he and Elsie must meet again. And he would be free to woo her.

Then this morning, from her own lips, he had learned of her betrothal to Eustace, and that her love for the dead man had been so strong as to make her vow to devote her life to the pursuit of the man who had killed him.

No, there was no hope. All Donald might expect was the privilege of sharing the search with her and perhaps of standing between her and danger, and then, in either event, of saying good-by to her. For a woman who cares enough for one man to stake her future on the punishing of his murderer is not likely to listen with approval to another man's suit.

Steele shook his broad shoulders impatiently to

banish the heavy thoughts which oppressed him. Snapping his fingers to Bronze, he swung into the soft-lit avenue of Australian pines, and made his way toward the deep hotel grounds.

There was a crowded audience surrounding the gayly illumined grand stand a furlong to his left. There were drifting white-clad crowds filling both pavements of Flagler Avenue behind him. In front, another furlong, the lights of the hotel shone out through the tropical gardens surrounding the wide verandas. Everywhere were light and gayety and human throngs—except in this short stretch of avenue.

Steele and Bronze had the avenue to themselves for the whole of its brief and pleasantly shaded length. Except for one or two empty cars that had been parked there by people who were listening to the band concert, the avenue was vacant when Donald and his dog approached it.

Steele moved listlessly along the sidewalk, Bronze close to him. The collie seemed to know his master was sad, and he pressed against the man's knee in silent sympathy, accommodating his gait to Steele's.

In this way they traversed perhaps half of the avenue.

Then, without warning, Bronze lifted his head and growled. There was more of question and of uneasiness than of wrath in the growl. Yet the

demonstration was so unusual to his ordinarily placid chum that Donald turned sharply around to note what might ail the dog. As he did so, he heard a faint whistling noise, followed at once by a light thud.

Halfway he turned, with that impulsively sudden motion. But he could not turn farther.

He could not turn farther because his white silk coat was firmly pinned to the thick trunk of an Australian pine tree just behind him.

An involuntary exclamation of astonishment burst from the startled man. At sound of it, Bronze halted in the act of springing toward one of the several wide clumps of shrubbery dotting the park to his right. He turned to his master, as in question whether the exclamation were a command to him.

But Steele was not attending. At the first useless effort to move forward he had slipped out of the coat. Now, as well as he might, by the foliage-dimmed rays of the nearest electric light, he was staring at the impaled garment.

The silk coat hung limp from the tree. It hung there, instead of falling, because it was held in place against the tree by the blade of a knife.

The hilt still quivered from the shock of striking the tree. The point had pierced the bark, and was imbedded fully three inches in the tough wood.

Steele recalled the sharp twist of his own body as he had spun about to see why Bronze growled so imperatively. And he noted the portion of the coat which the knife had transfixed. But for that quick shift, he calculated, the flung blade would be imbedded considerably more than a mere three inches between his own ribs.

And this in law-abiding and peaceful and friendly Miami—the beautiful white pleasure city where crimes of violence were all but unheard of!

Bronze moved his inquiring gaze from his master's eyes and once more glanced truculently toward the shrubbery patch. This time Donald caught the import of the look, realizing the dog was lingering beside him only because he had mistaken that involuntary cry for an order whose import Bronze could not grasp.

"After him!" commanded Steele, breaking into a run, and leaving his coat where it hung. "After him, Bronze! *Get* him!"

The collie needed no second word. At the first syllable he dashed forward, Steele running at his side. Both bore down on that dim-seen clump at express speed. But before they reached it Donald paused in his fierce rush.

For, from the shadows of the clump went up a right dolorous bellow. And this bellow was followed by others, interspersed with luridly hic-

coughed oaths. Accompanying them, a tossing white form arose waveringly into view from amid the clump's interlacing branches.

Even the charging Bronze checked his assault at the unexpected sight and sound.

The dog shuffled to a walk, head on one side, eyeing dubiously the disreputable apparition which the nearer electric lights revealed.

There, shoulder-deep in the shrubbery, and attired only in a suit of ragged underclothes, stood, or rather swayed, a man. He was in sore need of a shave, and his thin hair was tousled.

He was holding both hands over his nose and mouth. From between his clasped fingers oaths and laments were exploded. From between those same grimily unwashed fingers a little blood was trickling.

"What in blazes—?" began the wondering Steele, as again Bronze peered curiously up into his master's eyes for guidance.

"You stepped on me face!" blubbered the weird figure, hiccoughingly, as he continued to caress his nose and mouth with his dirty hands. "You stepped on me face, you big lummox! Can't you watch where ye're going with them el'phant feet of yoous? Can't a decent man lay down for a nap when he's tired without gitting his poor face all walked on and stomped onto? Can't he? Huh? I—*Ouch!*"

A too-close fingering of the bruised features evoked this last howl.

Steele saw, at the man's feet, a pair of ragged trousers and a torn alpaca coat. Beside them was a frayed panama hat that would have graced an ash can better than a human head.

Donald grasped the situation. This bit of flotsam—this tramp or down-and-outer—had somehow contrived to get hold of liquor enough to make himself comfortably drunk. He had sought the nearest secluded sleeping-place.

There, by instinct, he had removed his outer clothes before lying down. And as the derelict slept, Steele's assailant had fled through the clump after hurling his knife. In the flight, his heel had come crashingly down upon the sleeper's upturned face.

In a flash, Donald had pieced together the story. And he cursed the apparition which had halted Bronze and himself while the assailant made good his escape.

"Y' stepped on me face!" wailed the unfortunate. "Y'big hog! I've a goo' mind to—to step onto yours!"

He lurched forward as if to fulfill this dire threat. But his feet were not yet free of the tangling effects of the liquor he had drunk. One of them tripped on a bush root. And he sat down very hard.

Once seated, he seemed to have no clear notion as to how to get up. But he shook impotent fists at the laughing Donald, and called down hiccoughingly an avalanche of maledictions on the head of his supposed face-spoiler.

There Donald left him. At any moment a policeman might come up. Or idlers, drawn by the maudlin outcries, might assemble. Then there would be the knife-transfixed coat to explain.

Whistling to Bronze, and starting back to the avenue, Steele drew the knife out of the tree, with no little difficulty, slipped it into his hip pocket and picked up and donned his pierced coat.

Then he resumed his interrupted journey toward the hotel. Once, under a light, he stopped to survey the ugly and curved-bladed knife which had so nearly let out his own life through a hole in his ribs.

"Bronze," he said, to the interested collie who watched him, "Bronze, if your queer sixth collie-sense hadn't made you growl—your sense or else something you saw in the shadows there, out of the tail of your eye—I'd never have moved so quickly. And this pigsticker would have landed. Mighty good knife-throwing at that! Must have been more than fifty feet away from me. Good aim and good arm. . . . But better dog, eh, Bronze?"

The collie, naturally, did not catch the meaning

of one word in ten. Yet he gathered, from the tone, that his adored master was praising him for something, and that he had made the man proud of him.

Wherefore, Bronze was vastly pleased. He frisked excitedly around Steele, wagging his plumed tail and leaping up to pat at the master's chest with his little white paws. Then he dropped to earth and listened with cocked ears. For Steele was speaking again.

"I—I told her, half an hour ago," muttered the man, "I told her Brand couldn't possibly suspect me, and that I had the name of being an aimless loafer around these waters. . . . Bronze, that's where I was wrong. Unless I'm still more wrong, that knife came from Oskar Brand. It wasn't his hand that threw it. But it was his brain that planned the throw."

Bronze could glean no meaning from this mumble, beyond the repetition of his own name. Yet he knew, from the tone, that his master's mood had changed. And he thrust a sympathizing muzzle into the cup of Donald's hand as they continued their walk toward the near-by hotel.

"A shot would have brought half the city down on him, Bronze," went on Steele, half-aloud, and following his old custom of talking to the collie as though the latter were human. "That's why Brand sent a professional knifer. The knifer saw

me leave the hotel. He saw me start back through that empty little avenue. He didn't dare tackle me face to face. There would have been danger from you while he'd be finishing me. So he risked a throw. H'm!"

They entered the hotel's front garden, skirting the lotos fountain on their way to the porch.

"We'll keep mum about this, Bronze," whispered Donald, as they neared the great veranda with its throngs and its lights. "It'd only worry her. But it doesn't make sense to me, at that. Why should Brand want me killed, unless he knows I'm closer to his hiding place and to himself than I dared hope? People don't kill each other for the fun of it nowadays, Bronze. It isn't a safe or a profitable sport. If it comes to that, why did he kill Eustace? I've asked you that, before, a hundred times. Why should Brand have thrown over his own safety and his snug headquarters and made himself a fugitive from justice, —only for the satisfaction of paying a petty grudge? He wasn't drunk, either, when he did it. I'd seen him, not ten minutes before, Bronze. He was cold sober. If he'd had a reason for wanting Eustace out of the way he could have found fifty better ways than by shooting him with the only gun of its caliber in all that region. Why, that drunken bum, back in the shrubbery, would have had better sense! And yet Oskar Brand is the

brains of the whole bootleg trade. It doesn't—it doesn't add up right!"

Meantime, "that drunken bum back in the shrubbery" had undergone a miracle of recovery. The moment Steele and the dog disappeared, the drunkard became alertly sober. With unshaking hands he picked up his hastily discarded clothes and put them on. Then he fingered regretfully an empty knife-sheath, and tossed it far from the clump of shrubs. After which he strolled carelessly across toward Flagler Avenue, a rueful hand to his very slightly bleeding nose. He had hit it somewhat harder than he intended.

Next morning, the day broke dazzlingly clear and with the trade winds piping strong. With Mrs. Gray waving good-by to them from the veranda of the Royal Palm, the three adventurers set forth on the quarter-mile walk to Burgess Dock, off which was moored Ellman's six-passenger seaplane, *Sky Lady*.

Early as it was, there were children romping on the sunny grass of the palm-shaded park. At the park's waterside end, a score of elderly men were bent over chess-and-checker-games along the weather-beaten tables. Behind them, six youths and oldsters were immersed in the usual quoit-throwing contest.

The trade winds made the palm trees' billion

leaves slither and rattle with a sound as of summer rain. Here and there in treetops some mocking-bird sang his soul out. Above all was the dazzling sub-tropic sky, and, beyond, the stretch of glittering azure-emerald sea and bay with Miami Beach's strip of green and snow-white in the distance.

The glory of the morning infected Elsie to a gayety that Donald tried to share.

"I've been looking forward all night to this flight of ours!" she said gleefully, as they left the park for the more cluttered waterfront beyond the bottom of Flagler Avenue. "I've never 'been up,' you know. 'Been up' is the right phrase for 'flown,' isn't it? Just as 'flight' is the word for a 'trip.' I'm learning fast. And I'm thrilled with the idea of flying. Just think! in another few minutes I'll be doing what two million years of my ancestors declared couldn't be done. I'll be flying! Think of that! People who go in fast trains or motorcars are only going a little faster along the same surface that has been traveled by their ancestors in ox carts. It's the same with people who go in the fastest motorboats or in submarines. Folk have been sailing the water and diving under the water ever since the birth of the world. But, till this past few years, no human was ever able to fly through the air. Do you wonder I feel so thrilled about it? But of course it's an

old, old story to you. I'd as soon expect a dreadnaught's captain to enthuse about a trip in a canal-boat, as for you to get excited over a sedate little passenger flight like this. Is *Sky Lady* moored at the next dock, or the one beyond?"

"At neither," he told her. "At no dock at all. The passenger seaplanes are all anchored out, to floats, a hundred yards or more from shore. We go out to them in boats. There's Burgess Dock over there now, and that's *Sky Lady* out yonder, with Ellman fussing around her engine. He's the one in leather. The two others with him are roustabouts of his, I suppose. You'd have had a more comfortable trip in one of the Aeromarine boats. Still, *Sky Lady* looks stanch enough. And he's made fully a hundred safe flights in her. Here we are."

He led the way to a creaky dock, from whose end bobbed a wallowing motorboat. In this, besides the boatman, were seated precariously a little old lady in shiny black and a lanky man of late middle age in shinier black. They were sitting gingerly on opposite sides of the boat, in apparent effort to "trim ship." Each was clutching the gunwale nervously every time a light ground swell made the boat bump against the stringpiece.

Ellman had not exaggerated in calling them "two born vaudeville screams." Apparently, too, they felt as out of place in the present surroundings as

would a pair of Brahmin chickens at a barn dance.

They eyed the oncomers with sour suspicion, and concentrated their disapproving looks upon Bronze. The collie, paying no heed to them, obeyed Steele's gesture by jumping into the pitching boat and curling himself into a compact ball at his master's feet.

"What's the dog for?" asked the lanky man. "He's never going along in the flying machine, is he? Why, he's li'ble to get scared and go to plunging around and upsetting us or maybe getting mixed up in the propeller or something! Take him back ashore."

"My friend," said Donald, pleasantly. "This dog has flown a good many thousand miles in his day. He was on all my flights in the war, and he's flown with me nearly every day for the past six months. He's—"

"Oh!" exclaimed the little old lady. "Is he the dog the newspapers call the 'Sky Terrier,' on account of his flying so much? I read a piece about him. And it made me think of a long piece of po'try I read once called 'The Hound of Heaven.' That'd have been a better name than 'Sky Terrier' for him, if—"

"He isn't a terrier," snapped the lanky man. "He's a shepherd dog, Ma'am. And whatever he is, I don't like the idee of—"

"I read all about *you*, too, in that piece in the

paper," the old lady informed Donald. "And I read again this morning how your flying machine got all bust up, yest'd'y, out Fort Lauderdale way. You're Mr. Steele, I take it. I'm Mrs. Hyle. Pleased to meet you. I hope you don't think I'm too brazen, introducing us like that when we're to be fellow-trippers, up in the air. This gentleman's name is Mr. Agar. Mr. Ellman introduced us to each other at his office yest'd'y."

Agar acknowledged the introduction glumly. He was still glowering with disfavor at Bronze as the boat began to chug across the dancing water toward the waiting seaplane. He nodded noncommittally, and he nodded again as Elsie was made known to Mrs. Hyle and himself.

"Mind you, young man," he adjured Ellman as the aviator helped them to the seaplane's float and greeted them in turn, "mind you, I'm taking your word this trip's as safe as a church. If it isn't, you're due to have a thundering big damage soot on your hands when we get back."

Ellman winked covertly at Steele, as he made reply: "If *Sky Lady* wasn't safe, she wouldn't have weathered all her hundred-and-two flights this past year. She—"

"The cracked pitcher went oftener'n that to the well," grumbled Agar. "But she got bust at last. However— Where'll I sit?"

Ellman guided the complainer and Mrs. Hyle

into the two front seats of the cockpit, motioning Elsie and Steele to the two seats just behind them. Bronze, without orders, curled himself at Steele's feet.

The helmets were dealt out, and with them generous lumps of ear-stuffing cotton from a roll proffered by Ellman.

"What's this for?" demanded Agar, glowering suspiciously at the cotton.

"To keep the engine's noise from hurting your ears and making you deaf!" explained Ellman. "Stuff plenty of it in both ears."

"No second man with you?" queried Donald, under his breath, as Ellman passed him, in the cotton-dispensing progress.

"Nope," answered Ellman. "Costs too much. It's all I can afford to pay the two chaps who help me with her here at the float. She's as safe with one pilot as with two. Anyhow, she's as safe *this* time. If I should get heart failure, I guess you could handle her O.K. . . . No, ma'am," he broke off to tell Mrs. Hyle. "If she came down in mid-ocean she wouldn't sink. She isn't sinking now, is she? She'd float for a week in the roughest water ever. I'd 'taxi' her along. Just don't be scared. Enjoy yourself. Now, then!"

He signaled his two helpers on the float. One of them began to cast off the lines. The other ran to the wide-winged propeller and twirled it.

The four human passengers settled themselves expectantly in the shoulder-high cockpit and watched the preparations.

Presently the propeller whirled free, buzzing like a trillion giant hornets. The seaplane was under way, scudding across the bay at an ever-increasing speed, the white water parting at her prow in a double wall of foam. Out she roared in a huge arc, gathering momentum.

"Watch the water alongside!" Steele bade Elsie, raising his voice to be heard above the propeller-purr and through the earpads and cotton. "Another quarter-mile and you'll see us 'take off.' You'll see the water begin to move downward, away from you. Then you'll know you're flying at last. She'll do ninety miles an hour or more once she gets into her stride. And you'll find there's not half as much motion as in the smoothest railroad train. She's taking off!"

As he spoke, *Sky Lady* lifted herself, without effort, from the surface of the bay and started upward at an oblique angle.

From habit, Donald Steele cast a backward glance down at the spot where they had quitted the water. The plane had made an unusually wide detour in gathering speed. Owing to the presence of so much shipping she had not gone straight ahead across the bay, but had made an almost complete circle.

Thus she had "taken off" not a hundred yards from the float where she had been moored.

Looking down, Donald could see clearly the floating moorings and the little unpainted motor boat that had brought them out from the dock. The boy who manned the boat was once more getting her under way to take the two helpers back to shore.

One of these helpers had already stepped over the gunwale and was seating himself in the boat. The other helper was still standing on the float shading his eyes from the sun-glare and gazing upward at the departing *Sky Lady*.

Straight down into the upturned visage looked Donald Steele. For an instant he looked idly. Then his lids narrowed and a frown creased his forehead.

The gesture of hands raised to face was queerly familiar. Steele prided himself on never forgetting or misplacing a face once clearly seen. Yet, for a few seconds, he could not place this upraised countenance, familiar as were it and the man's gesture.

Then, the other caught sight of Donald, looking curiously down at him. Immediately he ducked his head and moved away toward the waiting boat. There was an air of furtiveness in his avoidance of recognition.

And now Steele remembered subconsciously that

this roustabout had kept his back to the party all the short time they had been on the float, and that he had kept himself busy, out of view of the passengers, after they had taken their places in the pit. He had noticed it only because the fellow's colleague had twice called him to do some bit of preparation work, and the roustabout had still kept his back turned.

As Donald's brain turned over and over the brief vision of the upturned face and shielding hands, trying to place them in his elusive memory, he saw all at once in his mind's mirror an unshaven and very drunk tramp standing in a patch of ill-lit shrubbery his hands upraised.

And Steele remembered. He placed the man, past all doubt.

But, even though his senses told him he could not be mistaken, yet he was loath to believe. Aviators—even penny-saving "independent" aviators—do not hire drunken tramps to do skilled work on their floats. This man's upraised hands, a few moments ago, had been firm and without a tremor. No man as drunk as the tramp had seemed could so soon recover his nerves' calm equilibrium.

Nor had the upturned face borne any such marks as must the tread of a heavy heel have made on it.

His mind oddly troubled, Steele glanced aside at Elsie. The girl was looking down with all the

glad zest of a child at the wonder of panorama stretching itself out below the steadily-mounting plane.

The two in front of him were crouching low in their seats and were peering fearfully about them.

The plane wheeled northeastward in its acme of height and faced the stiff trade winds at a speed of nearly ninety miles an hour. As a result, a hurricane beat in around the windshields and at the voyagers. Old Mrs. Hyle's helmet-straps had been ill-tied. Now, at the wrench of the gale, the helmet was whipped loose. She threw up both hands to seize it as she felt it dragged backward off her head.

She was lucky enough to catch the leathern cap just as it arose clear of her mountain of snowy and tumbled hair. Donald leaned forward to help her adjust it again to her head. But she ducked farther under the windshield's protection just as his outstretched fingers touched her.

His seal-ring was caught in a loop of her silvern back hair. The forward jerk of her head released it, and she was not even aware of his touch. But that same forward jerk—before the loop of hair could pull itself free from the ring's bezel—sufficed to lift the entire white wig an inch or so from its wearer's head. Underneath it, at the nape of the neck, Donald had a lightning glimpse of a line of crisp black hair, close cropped.

Chapter V

IT was all over in a second or so. Elsie Duff, still gazing delightedly out on the scene below, had not even seen the mishap to the helmet or Donald's attempt to go to the wearer's assistance.

Nor did the helmet's wearer realize that other forces than those of the wind had helped to dislodge momentarily the carefully fastened snowy wig. The helmet's flying chin-straps were caught and deftly retied. Then, swiftly, apprehensively, Mrs. Hyle glanced back over her shoulder, as if to see whether or not others had noticed the shift of the wig.

But Agar and Elsie were gazing—the one worriedly and the other joyously—over the waste of ocean beneath. And Donald Steele had bent down to pet Bronze. In relief, she settled back again, low down in her seat.

Steele's brain was in a maze. He would have given all his earthly possessions to have Elsie Duff safe in Miami again. For his own part, the odd little double-mystery made his blood tingle with eager adventure-craving. His curiosity was piqued. His fighting spirit was roused.

But an airship, moving at nearly ninety miles

an hour at a height of something more than five hundred feet above a wind-whipped ocean, is not the place wherein to court adventure of a life-and-death sort while the fragile woman of one's heart is a fellow-passenger.

Steele was a veteran warrior. And now, after all his many months of peaceful life, he was conscious of the old-time thrill of premonition which had been wont to apprise him of danger in the skies above Flanders and war-scourged Northern France.

Trouble was ahead. Steele did not know how he knew it. But know it he did, as certainly as if the forecast had been written before his eyes in letters of flame. Wherefore, his heart flinched at thought of Elsie's possible danger, even while his spirit leaped forward avidly to meet that danger for himself.

Then he called himself a fool for suspecting anything of the sort. He knew Ellman was an honest man, and a fairly efficient aviator with a slight war-record. He knew *Sky Lady* had a reputation for being a stanch boat. He knew the flight was scheduled to last less than three hours in all. What was there to worry about?

But, instantly, into his vision came the man who had played drunk the night before, and who had stared up at the seaplane so enthralledly this morning from the float. Why had the impostor pre-

tended he was drunk and why had he pretended his face was bashed in from contact with the heel of a running man?

Of course, a fairly light tap, scientifically delivered on a certain part of the nose would have started the bleeding, and would have left no visible sign next day. But what had been the chap's object in causing his own nose to bleed and in pretending to have been roused from a drunken sleep? What was the idea?

And, with the question, came the reply. The knifer had hurled his weapon. He had missed. The fleet collie would have brought him down before he could hope to run halfway across the light park. And cleverly he had adopted the one ruse to avoid all that, and to shift suspicion from himself. It was as clear as day.

But what had been his object in trying to kill Steele? And how did he chance to be working for Ellman? Steele resolved to ask the aviator all about him as soon as they should land, and to collar the knifer himself, if the latter were waiting for them on *Sky Lady's* return to Biscayne Bay. In the meantime, it was useless to muddle his brain with conjectures which could soon enough be verified or disproven at the flight's end.

As he forced himself to dismiss the insoluble problem, another popped into his laboring mind.

This Mrs. Hyle! This simple-seeing little old

small-town lady with the cheerily demure manners and the black cotton gloves and the bombazine Sunday dress and the cheap veil and bonnet,—*and with the snow-white wig of old-fashioned coiffure, that covered crisp, short, black hair!*

That was a poser. And Donald Steele attacked the new puzzle in vain.

Many an elderly woman resorts to a wig to mask the fact that her own hair is turning gray or that it is growing thin. But, in all his life, Steele had never heard of a form of inverted vanity which could make a woman cover a crop of thick and healthy dark hair with a disfiguring whitish wig. It was past his slight experience with women.

There is a story told by hair to those who have the key to read it. And this story had been explained to Steele, in Flanders, by a messmate who was a wigmaker. For example, old hair is of wholly different quality and growth from young hair. An elderly man or woman may sometimes have abundant hair. But it lacks the crisp and vigorous appearance and texture of a younger person's.

This Hyle woman's real hair—so far as Donald's one brief glance at it had shown—was the strong and luxuriant hair of a person under thirty. Yet, at a glance, its owner seemed somewhere between sixty and seventy.

Steele sat staring dumbly at the back of the

neatly wigged white head. Then he hit upon a ruse he had learned from no less a wizard than Mark Twain, in his own boyhood's reading of "Huckleberry Finn." An imp of mischief took possession of Donald.

Reaching out his hand—and first making certain Elsie was not looking—he drew out deftly the big and heavy-topped black onyx-head hatpin which had skewered Mrs. Hyle's bonnet to her wig. She had laid the bonnet carefully on the seat beside her when she donned the leathern helmet in its place. Steele had seen where she placed it. A single quick dip of his fingers not only located it, but extracted the pin from it.

Now, leaning far forward, he called loudly in the wig-wearer's shielded ear:

"Here's your hatpin! *Catch!*"

As he spoke, he held forward the heavy pin, so that it came into her line of view. She reached out to take it from him. But, through seeming awkwardness, he let go of it before her capable fingers could close on its square head. He dropped it into her lap.

Instinctively her knees came together in the attempt to catch the bauble.

Donald Steele leaned back in his seat, grimly satisfied with the success of his experiment. Mark Twain, as ever, had proven himself a true student of human nature. And the old test, outlined in

"Huckleberry Finn," had once more served its turn.

A woman is accustomed from childhood to the wearing of skirts. Thus, when an object is tossed onto her knees, she widens her lap to receive it. A man, on the contrary, brings his knees instinctively together, lest the tossed object fall to the ground between them.

This latter was what Mrs. Hyle had just done.

"What sort of traveling companions have we got anyhow?" mused Steele in mystification. "A little old lady who is really a little young man—a corking good actor, at that. And a lantern-jawed slab of a backwoodsman who may be every bit as much a fake as she is. People don't get themselves up that way for the fun of it. And if they are doing it for any big purpose, why are they wasting time on a pleasure flight of this kind? . . . I wish Elsie hadn't come along. . . . And I wish I'd brought a gun. Though what in blue blazes I could need a gun for is beyond me."

The Florida east coast was fading into haze behind the speeding plane. Its low shoreline and mangrove swamps were little more than a blur. Ahead, the fire-blue Atlantic stretched out to infinity in a brilliancy of hue that no northern waters can know. A handsome liner of the P. & O., bound for Nassau, lay to southward, its smoke trail leaving a smutty smirch on the dazzle of the day.

Now and then a porpoise would curve upward from the blue waters, his shiny black shape cutting a low half circle through the air. Again, a gigantic pale-brown turtle—perhaps six feet across and perhaps four hundred years old—would be sighted, basking lazily atop of the waves. A school of tiny flying fish skittered like silver spray over the blue surface.

Sometimes *Sky Lady* swooped low and skimmed above the ocean scarcely ten feet above the upreaching whitecaps. Again, she would creep upward toward the zenith by a succession of stairlike rises until she flew parallel to the water at a height of perhaps six hundred feet.

To Elsie, very evidently, it was the sensation of a lifetime. To whirl along at ninety miles an hour, a furlong above the ocean, with the wind shrieking about one and with practically no sensation of moving—this is an experience which sinks deep into the emotions of every novice.

To Donald Steele, the trip's only sensation was the presence of the cleverly disguised man in the seat in front of him and the earlier recognition of the man who had stood on the float looking after the departing seaplane.

In his time, and in his own plane, and over stricken battlefields, Steele had soared many times higher than this clumsy passenger airship could climb. He had whizzed through cloud and storm

at fifty per cent faster speed, the target of hostile planes and of anti-airship guns. Thus, the mere sensations of the trip, as a trip, were no keener to him than had he been sitting on the rear bench of an open street car.

Yet never in his peril-flights, over the war zone, had he known the gnawing worry which possessed him now. For in those flights he had been alone, or with no comrade but Bronze. And now, if there were any possible danger, such as his intuitions warned him of, Elsie Duff must share that danger.

In vain he pooh-poohed the whole idea of peril. The dread would not leave him. He took out his watch and found they had been flying a bare thirty minutes. In another two hours, he reflected, they would be standing safe and sound on Burgess Dock in Miami.

He glanced across at Elsie. Her eyes met his, and she laughed from sheer joyous excitement. Unconsciously she slipped her hand in his, as might a child who is happy and who wants the nearest grown-up to share that happiness.

The pressure of her warm little fingers stirred him to the soul. But at once he realized it meant less than nothing, and that she was at heart a million miles away from him and always must remain so.

His practiced gaze sweeping the horizon in front of them presently picked up the first tiny and scat-

tered bronze wave-whipped rocks which mark the westerly approach to the Bahamas. These he pointed out to his seatmate, to her vast interest.

Then, from the waves appeared a white coral wall of rock, scarce ten feet high and perhaps four hundred feet wide at its broadest part—a wall some two miles long and crowned with waving palm trees. Here and there through the trees they had glimpses of low-roofed white huts, and at the wall's northern point was reared a low white stone hotel. On all sides, the water was crystal clear and of every imaginable shade of sapphire and emerald and aquamarine and purple. High white waves crashed against the northernmost sides of the rock. In the long, thin island's center was an unostentatious grave hedged by a railing.

"Bimini!" Donald told the girl, raising his voice to pierce through the cotton which clogged her ears. "There's where the Aeromarine planes land. It's the nearest British territory. And it's the gateway to the Bahamas."

Almost before he finished speaking, the thin tongue of coral island was left behind, and they were bearing toward a fatter and flatter island with a great swamp-lake in its center.

"That's South Bimini," Steele told the girl. "From now on to Nassau passengers on planes or on boats are never out of sight of land. Look! Yonder begin the shadroe bunch of islands."

Far in front of them the azure of the sea was thick strewn with all manner of excrescences, from table rocks which scarce cleared the rollers to tortoise-shaped or craggy heaps of land covering many acres.

"There's Turtle Rock," went on Donald, "and, —when we get above that precipice, beyond it, jutting up from the ocean, look straight down. At this time of day you'll be apt to see something interesting."

Scarce catching his loud words above the purr of the propeller and the swish of the increasingly strong wind, she yet divined their sense and that of his pointing arm.

Looking down, she saw a rugged precipice that jutted abruptly up from the ocean to a height of perhaps a hundred feet or more. Against its windward side the breakers were smashing. For the stiff wind of earlier morning was strengthening to a gale out here at sea.

But, nestling like a flock of chickens in the lee of a henhouse on a wintry day, she saw no less than fifteen little schooners snugly cuddled at anchor off the leeward side of the rock.

There—invisible from the windward, by reason of the precipice, and equally invisible from leeward because of low water and shoals which forbade the passage of large ships on that side—lay the fifteen heavy-laden schooners.

From an airship alone could they have been seen. One or two men sprawled lazily amid the tarpaulin-covered deck-cargoes. The rest of the crews apparently were sleeping below.

"Booze-runners!" explained Steele, trying again to make Elsie hear, through the noise and the ear-muffling. "A whole fleet of them. They loaded at Nassau or some other Bahama port, and started for Florida last night. At daybreak they put in here to hide. At dusk they'll set sail again for the Florida mainland, and unload their cargo before daylight. I've watched them, from up here, dozens of times. It's one of the bootleggers' favorite hiding places when they have to break a voyage for fear of the revenue boats."

And now he noted that Elsie was not the only passenger who was trying to catch his words. Mrs. Hyle had half-risen from her seat and was leaning back in an effort to hear him. But, as he turned to look at her, she sank back abruptly into her place and pretended to be adjusting her dress skirt.

Donald drew from his pocket an envelope and a pencil. On the envelope back he scribbled:

"Did you bring along that alligator-slaying popgun of yours? It might come in handy to pot a few porpoises or flying fish as we pass above them."

With a laugh he handed Elsie the seemingly nonsensical message, along with the pencil. But there

was sharp anxiety in his heart as he watched her read it. She smiled in amused toleration of his poor joke. Then she wrote a line or so beneath what he had scrawled and handed it back.

With fingers that had some work to remain steady, he took the envelope from her, and he read:

"No, of course I didn't. What's the use of having a perfectly good ace as an escort if I must clutter up my pocket with a gatling gun, too?"

He forced a grin to his stiffening lips, nodded and renewed his watch of the island-studded, blue-green waters ahead of them.

He did not like the aspect of the ocean. The wind was blowing a gale that whipped the rollers into a myriad huge whitecaps. *Sky Lady,* presumably, was stanch enough to cut through the wind unharmed. And, presently, when she should wheel and start on her return trip the gale would be at their backs. Yet, with Elsie Duff aboard, he was aware of a nervousness which had been foreign to him in his own most hazardous battle-flights.

On flew the seaplane, steady as a rock, for perhaps another ten minutes. Below, the ocean no longer spread unflawed or even sparsely starred with land. The islands were becoming more and more numerous. From that great height, they seemed bunched together in irregular patterns,

though there were varyingly large tracts of water separating all of them.

Then came what the experienced Steele had been waiting for. Ellman elevated his plane's nose, almost imperceptibly, as the first manœuver of the spectacularly wide curve he planned to make in bringing her around to face Florida and to commence the return flight.

The plane responded readily to the pilot's will. Upward at a slight grade she arose, beginning the sweepingly broad curve.

Then, of a sudden, as she leaned athwart the fist of the gale in the full strain of the evolution, there was a snapping sound that pierced through helmet-pads and cotton-plugs to the ears of all the passengers.

There was a lurch which almost flung the four from their deep-set seats. The plane careened at an angle of ninety degrees. The gale smote her uptilted wings and whirled her completely over; then righted her again, as she plunged like a thunderbolt toward the tossing waters six hundred feet below.

Well did Donald Steele know the meaning of that snapping sound. He knew it even in the instant before *Sky Lady* showed its dire effects.

The propeller was broken.

And, from the plane's actions, not only one blade

was out of commission, but both blades—an almost unheard-of catastrophe.

Sky Lady was a wreck hundreds of feet above water and with five humans aboard her. Steele's heart went sick within him, and he gripped Elsie Duff's steady little hand as though his fervent pressure might hope to save her. Her eyes met his. In her expression there was no terror—nothing but inquiry and a calm trust.

Ellman, as quickly as he could bring his startled mind into action, plied his levers and set the planes of his craft to catch the wind at the needful angle for safe volplaning to the water which seemed to be rushing up with incredible speed to meet her.

But, at the first sharp wrench, one of his levers buckled under the unwonted strain.

Steele's unshaven mock-drunkard, of the night before, had done his work with rare skill. And he had gauged cleverly the approximate distance *Sky Lady* would be likely to travel in such a wind before the parts he had weakened must collapse. Not in vain, in spy-work during the war, had he made himself useful to the Wilhelmstrasse by his genius for tampering with Ally planes. He had reduced such tasks to a science.

With apparatus that was proving more and more defective, Ellman sought to volplane to the sea's surface. Ordinarily, this would have proven a simple enough feat. And, even though *Sky Lady*

must have alighted on the waves far out of the track of ocean traffic, yet a landing could have been made at one of the dozens of near-by islands and help might eventually have been signaled.

But, thanks to wind currents and to a destroyed propeller and one crippled plane, he was making a sad botch of it. The intended volplaning took the form of a precipitate nose-dive.

By a mighty effort, Ellman shifted his remaining planes to an extent which averted a crash against the cliff-top of one of the smaller islands or a vertical plunge into the sea.

Sky Lady struck water with a smack which loosened her every joint and which flung the passengers violently against the tinkling windshields, amid a shower of flying glass and of blinding foam. But she struck at an angle which enabled her to avoid a downward plunge under the surface.

In the trough of the waves she wallowed, heaving dizzily and thrashed by spray. Ellman strove in vain, with her defective gear, to bring her around into the teeth of the wind. But she would not taxi. Steerless, she lay awash, while her panic-stricken passengers brushed frantically at the glass particles which cut their wet faces, and sought to hold on at the same time to the pitching sides of their seats.

"Steady all!" cried Ellman, clinging to the rigging and making a belated effort to avert panic.

"Sit still! You're in no danger. This current will carry us to shore on one of those two nearest islands before she can open up. The planes will keep her from turning turtle. *Sit still!*"

There was no need for his urgent caution. His passengers were not of the hysterical or the cowardly breed. Elsie snuggled the closer to Donald Steele, who was calling assurances to her. The two in the front seats were equally calm, after the first moment of paralyzing shock. Bronze had lifted himself from his resting place at Donald's feet and now sat blinking in mild interest on the tumbled waves which were tossing the unwieldy *Sky Lady* as they might have tossed a cork.

Steele had yanked off his own helmet and was untying Elsie's. Mrs. Hyle, observing this, let go of the seat-edge long enough to follow the example and to skewer the discarded bonnet securely over the mass of roached white hair. Agar, after a look at her, took off his helmet and shook the cotton plugs from his ears.

"Well!" he observed cheerily. "This'll sure be something to tell when we get back home. Kind of seasicky, though, isn't it?"

Donald, leaving Elsie, worked his way back, with some difficulty, to Ellman. There, a glance at the wrecked apparatus confirmed his first idea of the damage's extent. He and Ellman exchanged

a wordless nod. Then the pilot said, in a voice that reached only Steele:

"This current is working with the wind. It's due to slap us against that line of coral beach over there if it doesn't carry us clean past. We're less than a hundred yards away. These currents, hereabouts, are tricky, though. It may flirt us out to sea before we get there. If it does—"

He finished by pointing to the flooring beneath him. The jar of the unceremonious landing had loosened the side-and-bottom seams and jointures. Water was trickling in through ever-widening cracks.

Steele glanced at the wreckage, then at the nearing patch of coral beach that marked the verge of a little island made up of tumbled hillocks and gullies. With practised eye he marked the floundering drift of the plane. To his excited senses it seemed that they were moving past the near-by beach instead of toward it. Beyond swirled a churning expanse of wind-scourged sea. He looked again at the parting seams and gauged the rate at which the plane was settling in the water. Then he said, quietly:

"Get the line."

Ellman obeyed, reaching back for the coil of strong light rope.

"It's fast in its ring?" asked Steele. "Test it."

"Fast enough," answered Ellman. "But what use is that, when—?"

"Pay it out as I need it," ordered Steele, finding and unwinding the free end of the coil.

Looping this, he passed it over his head, under one arm, slipping off his coat and light overcoat as he did so, and kicking his feet out of his low shoes.

"You don't mean—?" blithered the horrified Ellman. "Why, man, no swimmer could live a minute in—"

"Shut up!" commanded Donald, noting that the man's voice was raised by fright, and dreading lest Elsie guess his own intent. "Now take care of this end of the job. So!"

As he talked, Steele had made note of the plane's drunken rise and fall. Now, gauging his moment, he dived.

So swiftly and so unexpectedly did he do this that not even Elsie turned about in time to observe it. The beat of waves against the plane's crumpling sides silenced the splash of his dive.

Only one other passenger of the demolished *Sky Lady* guessed what the man was attempting. And that was Bronze.

The others had their first intimation of what was going on when the collie sprang bodily from the cockpit and launched himself into the smother of tossing waves.

Then, turning, by common consent, they saw the dog disappear under the breakers just behind a newly-emerging human head.

Elsie cried out, and started impulsively to her feet. Agar reached out a detaining hand and thrust her back into her seat.

"You'll upset us all if you hop around like that!" he rebuked. "The dog pretty nigh upset us as it was. Sit still. And don't you be scared. He's sure a plucky chap. And that's the kind that wins out to safety—sometimes."

His glumly reassuring speech ended in a grunt of alarm. All four of *Sky Lady's* remaining occupants leaned forward with parted lips and staring eyes.

A gigantic roller had caught up the struggling man as though he were a feather, tossing him high, then sucking him far under. For a moment no sign of him could be seen on the turgid expanse of water.

Bronze, swimming a yard or so behind, in his attempt to catch up with his adored master, had been missed by the hammer-blow of the wave. Now, in its trough, he reared high his shaggy body, until its forequarters were far out of water. Then he plunged forward with a rush, and his head and shoulders disappeared beneath the surface.

An instant later—or, as it seemed to the trem-

blingly watching Elsie, a century later—the dog's submerged head came into view again. By the nape of the neck he was grasping the half-stunned Donald Steele.

The collie was making Herculean efforts to keep his master's head above water. And it was this painful grip on his neck which roused Donald from the brief daze which the wave-crest's blow had caused.

Tightening his every muscle, the man struck out for the nearing shore. Bronze, seeing that Steele was once more himself, let go and swam on at his side. At one second the two rode high on the green wave tops. At the next they were fighting in the deep trough with a high emerald wall of water before and behind them. But ever, inch by inch, they crept onward.

Before they had traversed half the space between plane and beach, Steele knew he had made no mistake in his pessimistic guess as to the set of the current. And, even sooner, Bronze's collie instinct had told him the same thing.

Insidiously, with an awful persuasiveness, the current tugged at them, to ease them aside from their goal and out to the tossing sea beyond. Only by swimming at a sharp angle to the opposite direction could they hold their course for shore. And this same current must inevitably draw the

helplessly floundering wreck of *Sky Lady* seaward with it.

The knowledge lent new force to Donald's tiring strokes. With set teeth he battled on, the water half-smothering him, the current clawing at him all the time. And the great dog swam at his shoulder, fearless, loyal, asking no better lot than to share his master's fate, whatever that fate might be.

As they swam, Bronze shook his classic head and snarled, veering, as he did so, closer to Donald as though to protect the man. And, in the same moment, something rough scraped against the swimmer's leg, abrading it as might a nail-studded board.

Then Steele understood. He understood, even before Elsie Duff's cry of terror was borne across the roaring waters to him. For, as she had seen a knifelike backfin cut the surface just behind the swimmers, so Steele knew that a shark had rushed for him and had missed his mark by so slight a margin that his rough hide had scraped the victim's leg.

Shaking off the dull horror that encompassed him at the contact, Steele varied his swimming by an exertion-wasting amount of violent splashing. Thus, he had heard, threatened swimmers may sometimes frighten off or mar the aim of a not-too-

hungry shark. Morbidly, he wondered if the theory were correct or if it were one of the myriad deep-sea lies which surround fishermen's stories of man-eating sharks.

Ill could he spare the extra effort and decreased speed necessary for these vigorous splashings of arms and legs. Yet more ill could he spare one of those same legs or arms.

Bronze, seeing that his master had slowed down, slackened his own speed, to remain close to him, as guard against this mortal danger which the collie sensed. But Donald would not have it so. Sharply, imperatively, he bade the dog go on. And, under that decisive command, Bronze resumed his former pace, though with miserable unwillingness.

Thus, one behind the other, they battled their way, the dog ever looking back over his shoulder at his master, the man smiting the water to foam in his efforts to frighten off the pursuing shark.

For a few seconds they continued thus. Through increasing fatigue, Steel dared hope he had rid himself of the shark. His eyes were so blurred by frequent immersions in salt water and by the rough caress of the wave-crests that the shore ahead was a mere blur to him.

He could no longer tell whether or not he was making progress; whether or not he was still swimming at the correct angle to offset the tug of the

outward-bearing current. His lungs and throat burned like fire from the salt water he was forever taking in. His muscles ached like a thousand ulcerated teeth. His limbs were as heavy as lead.

Every move was a grim triumph of the battling will-power over the exhausted body. And he wondered how much longer, at best, he might hope to keep up the hopeless fight. Into his reeling memory seeped an old Norse proverb he had read, twenty years earlier, in a schoolbook, and of which he had not thought since that time:

"Heroism consists of keeping on, one minute longer!"

And he kept on.

Too blind, from the salt in his eyes, to see the shoreline, now, even when the waves carried him high on their summits, he concentrated his stinging and indistinct gaze on the head of the dog, just in front of him. This head he could barely distinguish, near as it was. But by it he steered his course. He had faith that Bronze would make straight for shore, and that the collie's instinct would tell him how to make allowance for the powerful set of the current.

And Donald Steele followed him blindly, staking his life on a dog's intelligence.

"Heroism consists of keeping on, one minute longer!" he kept muttering meaninglessly to himself.

The slender line seemed to weigh a ton and to drag him backward under its ever-augmented weight at every stroke. If only he had the right to rid himself of it! Then, in shamed self-contempt at so unworthy a thought, he struck out afresh with his fading strength.

As he did so, his wave-battered ears caught another cry from Elsie ringing across the intervening turmoil of waters. And, once more something rough and terrifying smote him agonizingly across the knee.

Chapter VI

WITH his last vestige of effort, Donald Steele lurched forward through the water in a hopeless effort to escape the horror that had attacked him from beneath the waves.

The movement brought both his flailing hands in rough contact with the coral shingling of a beach.

Then, with a little gasp of relief, he knew it was the impact of his kicking knee with the coral that had so terrified him, and that no shark could swim in such shallow water as he had foundered in.

Staggering weakly to his feet, and almost knocked prone by the waves that clawed hungrily at him, Donald gouged the salt water out of his eyes and blinked around him. He was standing knee deep not thirty feet from shore. Bronze was already on the beach, shaking the clogging wetness from his mighty coat.

For a few seconds, Donald stood swaying thus, drawing deep breaths of sea air into his tortured lungs, and letting some of his wiry young strength creep back into his battered body.

Then he waded ashore, dragging the line after him.

Every step brought to him a little more of his resilient strength and eased the painful pressure of his lungs. Glancing back, he saw the plane still riding the waves, and, by dint of its clumsy expanse of surface, far less affected by the tugging of the current than he and Bronze had been.

Nevertheless, even as he had landed on the windward extremity of the island, so the plane was slipping past the last jut of land and in another few moments would be clear of it and headed seaward. All four of its occupants were still on board. But the settling of the craft had brought them almost awash with the waves.

The distance, on looking back, seemed ridiculously short, compared with the interminable stretch it had appeared to be while he was swimming it.

The man did not stand idle, as he mused on this. He had sighted a broken palm-tree's stump at the very edge of the water, a rugged remnant of a tree that long since had been snapped off by some sub-tropical hurricane. And toward this he hurried. Around the trunk's tough base he wound his line. Tying it firmly, he proceeded to haul. At every few feet, he would pause to take another hitch of the spare cordage around the stump.

Though the wind and the smashingly strong waves were now his powerful allies instead of his

foes, he found the task well-nigh beyond his best endeavors. Strain as he would, bracing himself against the stump, the plane floundered toward him with exasperating slowness.

"Cut away everything you can!" he yelled to Ellman. "Everything that drags. Get rid of it all!"

Whistling to Bronze, who was rolling gleefully in the sand to dry himself, Steele fastened a loop of the line around the dog's shaggy chest.

"Now, then!" he exhorted. "Both together!"

Bronze, after a second command, understood. Man and dog heaved forward with all their might, digging their feet deep into the stony sand. Under their dual force, and by dint of Ellman's cutting loose much of the dragging impedimenta, the wreck moved landward at new speed.

But presently it came to a grating halt, with such suddenness as to throw Steele and the dog clean off their feet.

"We've grounded!" called Ellman.

"What's your depth?" asked Steele.

Driving a pole overside, the pilot lifted it and showed with his finger the depth. Donald drew in the slack and made it fast.

"Stay back here, Bronze!" he bade the collie.

Then he started toward the plane. It was not only grounded, but settled by the head. And the

waves were breaking merrily over it. In another minute, under such hammering, it was due to break asunder.

Steele waded waist-deep out to the heaving craft and picked up Elsie, without so much as asking her leave.

"No, no!" begged the girl, resisting. "Take Mrs. Hyle first. She is older and—"

Paying no heed at all to her plea, Donald turned shoreward again, carrying her high above the water and deaf to her repeated entreaties that he bring the white-haired Mrs. Hyle ashore first.

"Oh," she panted, as he neared the beach. "Oh, Donald, it was so wonderful of you! And so *wicked!* Why, you might have been drowned. I prayed so hard for you! And when I saw that black fin cutting the water behind you— You're sure you're not hurt? You're *sure?* Tell me!"

"I'm all right," he said, speaking lightly to hide his embarrassment at her tearful solicitude. "Don't get frightened over it, now that it's all over. . . . I heard you call out when the shark was after me. But why did you call the second time? Just before I barked my knee against bottom. I—"

"Why, to tell you you could stop swimming and walk, of course," she made answer. "I saw Bronze coming out of the water just ahead of you and up onto the beach. And I knew how shallow it must

be. So I called to you to— Oh, I'll never forget, to my dying day, that hideous black fin and the—"

"Here we are!" he interrupted, with elaborate cheerfulness, setting her down on dry land. "Now, make yourself comfy while I go back for the others. But I don't see why they can't— And," he broke off, facing seaward again, "as a matter of fact, they have. They've more sense or more nerve than I thought."

She followed the direction of his pointing hand. Midway between the half-submerged plane and the beach, a strange little procession was advancing shoreward.

It was led by Agar, walking knee deep and most gawkily. He was carrying little Mrs. Hyle much as he might have carried a nest of hornets in a sack of meal. Behind him, and just starting landward from the wreck, came Ellman. The pilot was weighted down with a double armful of luggage, having taken out of the plane as many belongings as he could carry.

"Good idea!" approved Steele. "He's more of a man than I thought. Would you mind looking about for some driftwood for a fire, while I go back for a load of stuff, too?"

Without waiting for a reply he ran out into the water and to the plane, passing the others on the way. Deftly and thoroughly he rifled the wreck of its spare clothing and its store of emergency rations

and its matches and anything else which might be expected to be of service during a possibly prolonged stay on the island.

He was still busy loading himself down when *Sky Lady,* as by magic, resolved herself into her component parts, under the endless beating of the waves, and disintegrated into a flotilla of useless wreckage.

Snatching his abandoned shoes and coat from the débris, Steele added them to his load, and started shoreward. As far as might be he carried his heterogeneous burden above the reaching fingers of the waves and used it to maintain his own uncertain balance.

At last he waded up the beach, dripping and puffing, and joined his fellow-survivors around a fire of driftwood and dead palm-fronds which Ellman had just lighted.

"You're wet to the skin, young man!" Mrs. Hyle hailed him, accusingly.

"Yes," he made curt answer. "One is apt to get a bit damp swimming in these waters. The ocean, hereabouts, is eccentric that way."

"You might have been drowned!" she accused.

"We'd all have been," flashed Elsie, "if he hadn't risked his life for us!"

"Oh, I don't know," drawled Agar. "There's gener'lly a saner way out of any corner than by

these moving-picture stunts. Likely we'd have thought up some better way of getting ashore. Not that it wasn't plucky," he finished, graciously. "I'm not denying that. Only I don't hold with spectac'lar stunts, when—"

"My friend," interposed Steele, smiling amusedly at the rattled and cranky old fellow, "your tearful gratitude and Mrs. Hyle's makes me wish I might have done even more for you—that I might have shared the shark with you. Suppose we forget my sins in swimming without leave, and—"

"You're a man, Steele," said Ellman, quietly, as he gripped Donald's hand. "One of God's white men. And I'm proud to owe my life to you. Let it go at that. Don't be riled by these yaps. They're scared out of their wits, and they take it out by snarling."

Donald returned the handgrip, genuinely touched by the pilot's show of feeling and by his efforts to smooth the crudities of his other passengers.

"But," went on Ellman, "it isn't doing you any good to stand around in this gale with those soaked clothes on. I kept the rest of us fairly dry from the knees up, by dealing out the bunch of oilskins. And I brought ashore my spare suit of tweeds. The suit won't be a bad fit for you. Go and put

it on and then come back and dry these wet things at the fire. We'll have a good roaring blaze ready by then, and something to eat."

Donald took the proffered garments and rounded the hillock behind the beach.

When he came back a few minutes later carrying his armful of wet garments and clad in Ellman's spare suit, he found the pilot and Elsie making coffee over the new-built fire, while Agar and Mrs. Hyle were setting forth the pilot biscuit and tinned beef which formed the rest of *Sky Lady's* quota of emergency rations.

Presently, the castaways were seated around the blaze, munching away at their uninspiring meal and sipping hot black coffee, in turn, from the single collapsible cup in Ellman's kit.

"By the way," spoke up Donald, in the middle of the sparse luncheon, "how was this coffee made? Where did you get the water for it?"

"From the water-breaker I brought ashore," returned Ellman. "That one over yonder."

"H'm!" commented Donald. "That doesn't hold more than a gallon even if it was full when you brought it ashore. And fully a quart of it has gone into the making of this coffee."

"Well," spoke up Mrs. Hyle, her nerves still appearing to be ruffled by her late experiences, "what of it, young man?"

"Only this," replied Steele. "Before we use any

more water—before we drink any more of this coffee—if there's any left—I suggest we do a bit of exploring."

"I've done enough exploring this day to last me out my lifetime," snapped Mrs. Hyle. "I've had all of it I want. Here I'll sit, quiet, till some one comes to rescue us."

"That goes for me, too," chimed in Agar. "You young folks can skip around these rocks exploring and such-like monkey-shines if you're a mind to. I'm going to rest where I am, like Mrs. Hyle here. . . . Miss Duff, I'll trouble you for another wee drop of that nice coffee. It puts heart into a man, after all we've been through. I— Hey, you!" he cried, glowering on Steele. "What's that for?"

Donald very quietly had removed the coffee-pot from Elsie's reach as she leaned forward to hand it to Agar.

"I'll tell you what it's for, since neither of you will take a milder hint," said Donald, facing the two dissenters. "We are dumped down here on what is literally a desert island. Nobody knows we're here. Nobody knows where we are. It's known we planned to fly a short distance beyond Bimini, among the nearer islands. But that might mean anywhere in a fan-shaped area of hundreds of square miles. We're lost. Of course, when we don't show up this afternoon the alarm will be given. The Aeromarine Company's planes will

cruise in search of us. Then the Government planes from Palm Beach and Key West and Fort Meyer will take up the hunt. Eventually, we'll be sighted and picked up. But that may not happen for a week."

"But—" began Mrs. Hyle, argumentatively.

Steele went on, unheeding:

"If we were sighted when we flew over Bimini, they'll assume we took to the water somewhere beyond there. The current around Bimini sets dead in toward the Great Isaacs. They'll patrol the waters all along those reefs looking for us. And they won't look farther till they've combed that whole region pretty extensively. Or, if we weren't sighted from Bimini they'll suppose we went down somewhere in the Gulf Stream, as Moore's plane did. And they'll search the Gulf Stream as far north as Daytona before they think of hunting this maze of inner islands for trace of us. And, speaking of that, Ellman, I suppose you've got your chart along, of course!"

The pilot reddened.

"Well, no," he admitted, "I haven't. You see, I can work my regular trip by dead reckoning, I've made it so often. The compass got smashed, too, when we struck. And—"

"But you know about where we are, don't you?" insisted the wondering Donald.

"Well,—well in a general way, of course," fal-

tered Ellman, fidgeting. "But not exactly. You see, just as I was getting ready to turn back, this morning, I saw you pointing out that fleet of booze-runners to Miss Duff here. And she seemed so interested I thought maybe she'd like to see some more of them. I figured there might be a bootleg schooner or two hiding under an island's lee, somewhere farther on. We had made extra good time, and we could spare a half hour or so to knock around looking for them. And I—"

"I see," said Donald. "That adds an item of interest to the rest of the yarn. Searchers won't know where we are. And *we* don't know where we are; except that we're clear off the traffic routes; and in the middle of a network of islands that aren't even inhabited. Now,—"

"That's a fine long talk-record," put in Agar, "but it still don't explain why you grabbed the coffee-pot away from me and bantered us to go exploring with you. I'll thank you for that coffee."

"You don't understand—even yet?" retorted the exasperated Donald. "We're stranded on a desert island, with every prospect of staying here for anywhere from a week to a month. We don't know yet if there is a spring on the island or a drop of fresh water anywhere on it. We don't know if there is anything on it that can be used for food. We don't know that there is more than two or three quarts of water and a pound or so of

biscuit and tinned beef between us and death by hunger and thirst. Yet you blame me for stopping you when you want to drink up our emergency ration of coffee that may stand between some of us and death. There! You wanted the truth. Now you have it. Do you still feel a desire to swill the rest of our coffee? Do you?"

Agar stared at him, jaw agape. For a space nobody spoke. The breath of doom seemed already to have touched them all. Agar was first to shake off the spell.

"More moving-picture talk!" he grumbled. "Why, I wouldn't wonder if we was to be rescued before night! Don't go trying to scare us. Mr. Ellman, what do *you* think of all his palaver? Any sense in it? You're the skipper—the boss. You ought to know if any one does. What do you say?"

"I say," replied Ellman, a quiver in his voice, "I say he is talking Gospel truth."

"Jumping Jehoshophat!" gasped Agar.

He seemed to wilt beneath his shiny black clothes and to grow older and sallower. Mrs. Hyle began to sniffle in her handkerchief and to rock herself to and fro. Ellman drew a long breath, and continued:

"And there's another blunder you just made, Mr. Agar. You say I'm the boss of this party. I'm not. After the way I've botched things I'm

not fit to be the boss of a one-eyed mule. This man Steele has all the brains, as well as all the nerve and all the courage of this outfit. I place myself under his orders. The rest of you can do as you like. If we're to be gotten out of this scrape, he's the only one who can do it."

Elsie clapped her little tanned hands together impulsively. Steele looked and felt thoroughly uncomfortable. Mrs. Hyle continued to sniffle. Agar sat silent for a moment. Then, turning grumpily to Donald, he said:

"I guess maybe I'm a fool, Mr. Steele. And that's as near to an apology as anybody's got a right to expect from John A. Agar. I been all upset by these carryings-on to-day. Now, then, what d'you want us to do?"

"I'm not giving orders," said Donald. "If you ask what I suggest, I suggest we quarter this island each one of us following a different route in search of a spring. Also, each one to keep an eye open for any live thing that could be shot or snared for food. We've all eaten and drunk. If necessary, our lunch can keep us going till to-morrow. Thirst is largely a matter of habit. So is appetite. There is a world of difference between mere appetite and a gnawing hunger. If we can't find food supply or water it'll be time enough to ration what we have left and set aside each portion. But, till we've made sure there's no spring,

we needn't bother about the need of water-rationing. If there's a spring then we're safe enough. We can go much longer without food than without water—especially here in the sub-tropics. There's a certain amount of verdure on this island. That may mean there's a spring. Say," he broke off, with seeming carelessness, "speaking of shooting some kind of game, has any one a firearm of any sort?"

Ellman shook his head ruefully.

"Nope," said Agar. "What'd a law-abiding man do packing firearms in a law-abiding place like Miami?"

Mrs. Hyle stopped sniffling long enough to mumble a general denial.

"I never could a-bear the sight of guns!" she moaned.

"Hard luck!" commented Steele. "Well, shall we start? If we go to the top of this first hillock, back yonder, we can get the general lay of the land, and decide each one's route in the water-search. Then—"

"I declare!" sniffled Mrs. Hyle, "I'm real downright thirsty this very minute. I s'pose it's on account of all that talk about dying of thirst. I wish—"

"Wishing won't give you a drink, Ma'am," reproved Agar, "any more'n it'd give you a billion dollars or grow you a fresh set of teeth. Let's

start. The sooner we locate a spring the sooner we'll all get that drink you're honing for, Ma'am. Come along."

"I don't like to speak about such a thing," ventured Ellman, as the party got to its feet and prepared to move toward the hillock behind them. "But is there anybody with a bitter bad grudge against any of you? There's nobody, I know of, who's got enough of a grudge against me to want me out of the way. But—well, I examined that propeller of mine, and the steering gear and the rest. That wasn't put out of business by accident. It was done purposely. I could see that. And it was done cleverly. It was done so well that when I gave *Sky Lady* the once-over, this morning, before we started, I didn't notice a thing of it. People don't do such mischief just for a joke, unless they're loony. Whoever did that took a big chance. And he took it to harm or kill some one here. That's plain talk. But it's true. Mr. Steele will bear me out when I say the damage couldn't have been done by accident."

They had all come to a halt at Ellman's first words. Now, as Agar scratched his head and sputtered something incoherent about "more moving-picture talk," Mrs. Hyle burst into noisy tears.

"My niece, Mirandy," she blubbered, "always said she'd get even with me, because Cousin Baxter left me that money. She said I'd 'inflooenced'

him. And I never had at all. This is how she's getting even. If ever I get back to New Hampshire, if I don't have the law on that wicked woman—!"

"How much money was involved, Ma'am?" asked Agar, sourly. "A couple of millions, maybe? A woman or a man might risk being executed for that much."

"No," was the sulky reply. "But, it was some over nineteen hundred dollars—before the greedy old Inheritance Tax man grabbed his share. And Mirandy said to me, then—she said—"

"It's a miracle the European Governments haven't been after you for a loan," grunted Agar, in high contempt. "No wonder—"

"Ellman," put in Steele, drawing the pilot aside, under cover of Agar's blast of irony, "those two men who were helping you on the float, the shorter one, especially, how long have they been with you?"

"The big chap has worked for me ever since I set up business," returned the pilot. "The other one I hired three days ago, when my second helper broke a leg. Why do you ask? He came to me with fine references from the Fort Meyer hangar. He said he—"

"I just wanted to know," interrupted Steele, carelessly. "I suppose he could have learned, from your office sheet, who your passengers were likely

to be? Yes? I thought so. We'll have a little chat with him when we get back. By the way, you're the chief loser in this so far. I'm mighty sorry for you. You take it well."

"Why shouldn't I?" said Ellman, shrugging. "The rattle-trap old plane was insured to the limit. That's the one expense I never grudged. I wasn't making enough cash to pay my board bill lately. The Aeromarine people were getting all the business. I'm glad to break so near even and have cash to start over again in some new job. My commercial flying days are over. After this, of course, even a would-be suicide wouldn't consent to go up with me. Say, that Agar chap is a card! When I started to make the turn, up there in the sky, he stuck one hand out to the side, the way folks do in an auto when they're going to turn a corner. He's the limit. And as for the Hyle woman—"

"I want a talk with you about her later on," interposed Donald. "Just now—if they've quite finished their squabble—we'd best be starting on that hunt for food and water."

He turned to Elsie. The girl was shading her eyes and peering at some distant object on the opposite end of the shallow beach.

"See!" she exclaimed, as Steele approached. "What's that queer thing? It looks like the top of a dining room table waddling through the un-

derbrush. See, it's coming out into the open now. It—"

With a whoop, Donald Steele raced across the uneven beach at speed worthy of a professional sprinter. Bronze, at sight of his master's sprinting exhibition, joined in the run, barking delightedly and leaping high in air at Donald's side. The others stared in amaze at the exhibition.

As the half-seen object of Elsie's notice came floundering out from the undergrowth-strewn patch of beach farthest from water and began to make its way seaward, Steele had recognized it at a glance. And at once he had set in motion.

For here was a hawkbill turtle, perhaps three hundred pounds or more in weight, a turtle whose succulent body carried beneath its armor of shell enough toothsome flesh to feed the whole party for days. More—it was evidently returning to the water after burying a consignment of eggs in the sand back of the beach. And turtle eggs are as nutritious as they are palatable.

Small wonder that Donald ran at top speed to head off the fugitive before it should regain the safety of the waves!

But, either by sight or by sound, the unwieldy creature seemed to know it was pursued. For its shamblingly flapping gait quickened. And, at that distance, Steele had scant hope of overtaking it before it should slither into the sea.

Realizing this, he paused an instant and pointed to the hustling turtle.

"Bronze!" he bade the collie, as the latter ceased barking and followed with his deep-set dark eyes the direction of his master's hand. "*Get* him!"

The dog understood. Here was a familiar order and one which promised fun as well as duty. Like a tawny thunderbolt the collie sped across the remaining stretch of stone-strewn sand. In a second he had outstripped the fleet-running Steele and was bearing down upon the turtle.

He overhauled it just as the turtle's hawkbill nose was splashed by an in-rolling wavelet. The dog made a sturdy grab at the iron-tough shell, then seemed to realize the prey could not be overcome in this fashion.

Changing his plan of attack, he dashed, hock-deep into the water directly in front of his victim's line of retreat and sought to head off the escape by dint of frantic barks and little rushes.

On came the turtle, hissing threateningly at the harrowing collie. Bronze disregarded the hiss and dived for one menacingly outthrust flapper. This he slashed and dived for the head.

But the turtle had had quite enough of such an opponent. Finding its way barred, it essayed to shamble to one side or to the other, in hope of dodging its noisy and sharp-toothed assailant and to reach the safe water. But Bronze would not

have it so. It was ridiculously easy for him to head off each clumsy advance and to nip or slash at the waving flappers and protruding head.

Its every way blocked, the turtle came to a confused halt. In another moment, Donald Steele had caught up with the two. With a straining heave, he turned the turtle over on its back, where it lay, waggling futile feet and head.

"Here's the food problem solved!" Steele called gayly back to the others as they drew near. "Turtle soup, turtle steak, turtle stew, turtle eggs, —for a week or two to come. I've turned the poor thing over. Turtles can't get on their feet again once they're 'turned turtle.' It'll be waiting for us here when we get back from the water-hunt. It's high tide now. And anyhow, the twenty-inch tide of these latitudes wouldn't float it. So much for food. Now for water."

The incident did much to restore gayety and hope to the refugees. Even Agar chirked up and said he'd rather eat snapping turtle than pork any day, and that maybe this critter was as good to eat as snapping turtle. He deigned to pat Bronze on the head as reward for the collie's share in the chase. The dog drew away coldly from the clawing pat of the big hand and dropped back to his master's side again.

In lighter spirits than since their mishap, the party made their way up the steep side of the

hillock. Mrs. Hyle grumbled and moaned at the stiffness and the stoniness of the incline, and Elsie whispered to Steele to go back and give the old lady his arm. But Donald pretended not to hear. He had a strong impression that Mrs. Hyle was neither old nor a lady. And he was not minded to add color to the masquerade by lending his arm to the impostor.

Wherefore, Elsie herself turned back to proffer aid to the puffing and complaining laggard.

But Mrs. Hyle had come to a dead stop halfway up the hillock.

"I'm a-going back!" she announced. "You younger folks can shin up prec'pices and suchlike, if you're a mind to. It's too tiresome for me. I'm a-going back and sit by the campfire and get a nap. I'm all tuckered out. I'll make up for it by cooking the supper, if you like. But I'm no mountain-goat. You can take that or you can leave it."

Without waiting for response or for argument, she scuttled down the steep acclivity with a speed and dexterity amazing in an old woman who had just declared herself "all tuckered out." Arriving at the bottom, she made her way across the sands to the smoldering campfire. Putting several more sticks and a heavy driftlog on the embers, she settled herself on one of the oilskins in front of it, rolling up a second oilskin for a pillow.

"The grouchy old hen!" ejaculated Agar, glowering after her. "I'll bet she's a pesky bad neigh-

bor back where she lives. She's a lot like a cuss that said to me once that he'd rather be the meanest man in his town than the best man in mine. 'Well, friend,' I says to him, like that. 'Well, friend,' I says, 'you've sure got your wish,' I says. And he—"

He stopped for lack of breath. They had breasted the steep climb and stood panting on the summit. There, for a minute nobody spoke. All eyes were on the scene about and below them.

There on the sandspit, almost directly beneath their feet, reclined Mrs. Hyle beside the snapping campfire. Beyond, the blue-green sea flashed in the glare of the afternoon sun. Far and near, islands of many sizes and shapes stuck their backs up from the surrounding waves. A cool breeze had replaced the lashingly fierce wind of an hour earlier. The gale had passed on.

Behind them, their own island spread out to a length of perhaps a mile and an irregular width of about a half-mile in the widest part. It was a conglomerate mass of steep little hills and deep little gullies. A dozen men might manœuver through its mazes without seeing or hearing one another. Here and there was a patch of vivid green verdure. But, for the most part, the rocks and hollows were bare.

"If there's water," said Donald, "it's likely to be in that big green space over to the left where

the knoll slopes down into those clumps of trees. Or else in that other big green space to the right. I suggest that we don't separate as we arranged to. One or more of us would certainly get lost. Ellman, suppose you and Mr. Agar make for that patch of green to the right? Miss Duff and I will explore the patch to the left. If either party locates water, mark the spot and give a halloo. Then we'll all meet back here. Each party can take along one of these two collapsible buckets of Ellman's. One of them was made for a duffle-bag. But it'll hold water all right. Don't get out of sight of this hillock. If you do, it may take you an hour to find it again among all these tangles."

And so it was settled.

"Say," ventured Agar, pausing for a last comprehensive look as they started, "old Stepmother Nature must 'a' been trying her hand at making a joke when she grew these islands. Not any two of 'em anyways alike. Just take a squint at that old whopper yonder, the nearest one, there to south'ard. Looks like that big turtle the dog rounded up. Looks like it was made of baked mud. Smooth and round as the top of my derby hat, and as high as a church. And not a rock or a tree on it and no way to land, unless maybe a beach on the far side between it and that prec'pice island just beyond it. But I'll bet there's no more beach on that side than on the others. No human foot could

ever have trod there since the beginning of the world, I s'pose. Because there's no footing, any more'n on the side of my derby. Kind of solemn thought, hey? Then that one over to west'ard, now. Look how its—"

"I think," put in Steele, as the rhapsody threatened to become a travel lecture, "I think we'd better be looking for that spring while the light still holds strong. We can come back here and discourse on the beauties of nature more comfortably when we know we've all the water we need. Meantime," he added, as the lanky man flushed under his sallow skin at the interruption to his wondering speech, "meantime, we'll name that mudhill island 'Agar's Derby,' in honor of the man who first called attention to its queer looks. And I think you must be right about no human foot ever touching that island. Just as *Sky Lady* turned —just before the smash-up—we were passing over that island from the other side. I looked down. It's the same on that side as on this. Now, let's go!"

The two couples separated, each pair descending an opposite flank of the hillock, toward one of the two green stretches of verdure. The side chosen by Donald and Elsie was almost as steep as that by which they had mounted to the summit. More than once Steele took the girl's hand to help her over some difficult place.

He noticed that her clasp was firm and warm, and that she showed no sign of the ordeal through which she had been passing.

"You are a brick, Elsie!" he said, in rough approval. "Most girls would be having hysterics."

"No, they wouldn't," she denied, gayly. "That shows how little you know about women. Some girls get frightened and hysterical when a little mishap or scare comes to them. So do some men, for that matter. But in the *big* things of life—in the real dangers—you'll find the average woman is ever so much cooler and more self-possessed than the average man. That's true, Donald. Honestly, it is."

"It's true as far as you're concerned anyhow," he assented. "You're fine! It—"

"Nonsense!" she laughed. "What is there to be silly about? We're here, safely. And we're likely to stay here in comfort till some one rescues us. It is rather a lark, I think. Don't you? Why, even Mr. Agar is getting chipper and making speeches about the conformation of the island and all that. And Mr. Ellman is splendid about losing his plane. Of course, Mrs. Hyle is not quite at her best. But perhaps the poor woman hasn't any 'best' to be at. Some people haven't, you know."

"I know," he made brief answer, his mind running back troubledly to the mystery of the supposed old woman.

"I wish," said Elsie, shyly, "I wish you had helped her up that hillside. The two others were too far ahead and they didn't think. But I tried to ask you to help her. You didn't hear me. She was having a terrible time of it; she's so old and weak. I don't wonder she wouldn't keep on."

They had reached the foot of the hillock. In front of them wound a ravine-like gully which twisted in and out over a rocky bed and seemed to lead nowhere. But, from the summit, they had noted the beginning of the strip of verdure at its far end. So, sturdily, they began to traverse its rock-walled windings.

"Listen to me," said Donald, suddenly, as they tramped along, "I hate to tell you this. But it may prove wiser. 'Mrs. Hyle' isn't Mrs. Hyle at all."

"What?" cried the girl, stopping short and facing him. "I don't understand. You mean she has some other name? How did you—"

"Not some other name," he explained. "I don't know her name. And her name doesn't matter. Not some other name, but some other personality."

"I don't—"

"I believe she is not a woman at all. I believe she is a man."

"Donald!"

"Man or not, she isn't old and tottery as she makes believe to be. She wears a white wig. But

under it she has the strong black hair of some one in the twenties. And—"

"What on earth are you saying? Why—"

Briefly he explained. Elsie listened, her great eyes wide.

"You're sure?" she demanded, as he finished. "You're not mistaken? About the hair, I mean? Why should she—or he—"

"I don't know. That's what's puzzling me. It isn't done for a joke. Such things aren't. Why should any one disguise himself that way for a trip of this sort? It doesn't make sense. But neither does the trick played on our machinery. We're neck-deep in a mystery that I can't fathom at all. Ellman is all right. I feel sure of that. But—"

"But Mr. Agar?" she questioned, her eyes clouded with worry.

"I don't know," he answered. "What do *you* think?"

"Oh, I don't think anything about any of it!" she exclaimed, piteously. "It's all so impossible, —so like a bad dream! Anyhow, what is there we can do?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing but to sit close and watch. One thing is certain:—Neither Agar nor Mrs. Hyle could have had anything to do with our accident. They wouldn't have risked their own lives just to get us out of the way. No, that's

another unsolvable part of it. Whoever planned to kill us by dumping us into the sea must have planned to kill them too, or else didn't care how many were killed, so long as we were killed, too. Either that, or the person who planned to kill them didn't mind if we went, too. It's all a mixup! Unless—"

He broke off in his maunder of conjectures. They had come out of the gully. In front of them spread an undulating meadow of low shrubs and rank gray-green grass.

But what made Steele stop short in speech and in steps was the sight of a clearly defined path which ran diagonally in front of them from some point behind an outjutting knoll. The path ended not fifty feet ahead.

It ended in a lush thicket, whose center was a fresh-water spring bubbling up from a keg buried halfway in the earth.

"Water!" cried Elsie, running jubilantly forward.

"Yes," assented Donald, far less joyously. "Water. And people."

As he spoke he was studying the path. It was overgrown and in spots was half-effaced. Though its general course was still plainly visible, yet very evidently it had not been trodden for a long time.

Bits of wood and of leafage and scum, too, floated undisturbed on the surface of the spring,

denoting that no hand had brushed clean the top of the water. Sediment, too, had partly filled the bottom of the bottomless keg. Not for months had the spring been cleaned out.

"This is not a fisherman's cache of drinking water," he mused, as Elsie swept aside the surface débris and drank eagerly. "If it were the path would still be used. And there'd be signs of fish-scales and broken rope and all the other odds-and-ends that are around every spring a deep-sea fisherman uses. There's only one other class of men who could have used it in this out-of-the-way region. That is the bootleggers. The booze-runners. It—"

"You mean we must be somewhere near Brand's hidden headquarters?" demanded Elsie.

"No. But near some place he must once have used as headquarters. It seems to be deserted now. Luckily for us. His men could trap us here and slaughter us like sheep. Come, let's fill the bucket and start back. The others will be thirsty. And your friend, 'Mrs. Hyle,' may have drunk Ellman's breaker empty. I wouldn't put it past her."

Ten minutes later they stood again on the hillock's summit. Climbing the opposite slope, and in glum temper, were Ellman and Agar.

"No luck!" called Ellman. "We hunted the whole measly green patch from end to end. Not a

sign of a spring. . . . What have you got there?" he interrupted himself excitedly, as he noted the full two-gallon bucket. "Glory be! You folks found it!"

He and Agar broke into a run as they toiled up the slope toward the water-carriers. But Donald did not await their coming. His own gaze had strayed to the camp-site below. The fire was flickering merrily. Beside it Mrs. Hyle seemed still to be lying where she had lain when last they saw her.

But now the oilskin which had served her for a pillow was thrown loosely over head and body. Also, the half-distinguishable form beneath it seemed to be lying at a peculiar angle and in a still more peculiar posture for a peaceful sleeper. It did not look like Mrs. Hyle's neat little figure.

Stirred by some emotion he could not analyze, Steele set down the brimming bucket, and, curtly bidding Elsie wait for the two approaching men's arrival, he ran down the steep side of the hillock, toward the camp.

He reached the fire and stood, hesitant, an instant, above the oilskin-covered shape. Then, stooping, he pulled the oilskin to one side, revealing what lay beneath.

With an involuntary cry of mortal horror, Donald recoiled, as if from a striking snake.

Chapter VII

THERE lay Mrs. Hyle,—or the person who had masqueraded as Mrs. Hyle. Tossed a little to one side of the body lay, tumbled and torn, the voluminous snowy wig. Beside it was the black-spotted veil and the broken spectacles. The neat black bombazine dress still draped the distorted figure.

But it was no woman who lay there, despite the feminine habiliments and the artistically made-up skin.

Donald Steele was looking down into the face of a dead man,—an under-sized man still in the late twenties, as well as could be told through the paint,—a man with crisp, close-cropped black hair, and delicate features.

Contrasted with that ghastly lifeless face, the make-up and the black dress were revoltingly hideous. On the dead visage was frozen a look of panic terror.

Donald Steele, conquering his repulsion, knelt down and laid his hand above the heart. The body was still warm, but the heart was pulseless. Steele's light touch caused the head to roll a little to one side. And again he started back in horror.

For, drilled clean through the jugular, was a small-caliber hole, from which the lifeblood had poured. And the hole appeared again to the rear of the jugular an inch or two away.

The victim had been shot through the throat, even as Eustace Steele had been. Both killings had been accomplished in precisely the same manner.

Bronze had followed his master down the hillock, leaving Elsie and the two men behind him. As if in awe, the collie had approached the body. Then, pressing close to Steele's knee, he stood still.

But now, as the man still stared, thunderstruck, Bronze sniffed the air, excitedly. Then, he moved away from Donald and began to cast about in the sand, after the manner of a questing hound. The next moment he growled—fiercely, challengingly.

Steele glanced around. The collie was sniffing at footmarks in the tumble of stony sand. Distinct, impressed in the whitish grains of coral, Steele saw what his chum was inspecting.

It was the impress, several times repeated, of a dog's foot. Not the daintily aristocratic mold of Bronze's small pads, but the splay-feet of a larger and heavier dog.

"Hunding!" muttered Steele, his memory racing back to the giant police dog that was the inseparable companion of Oskar Brand.

As if in answer to his exclamation, Bronze growled again, in deep-mouthed hate, and set off

at a hard gallop along the beach to the verge of the ocean. His nose was to the ground. He was on the trail of the dog he loathed, and perhaps of the dog's master, too.

But at the edge of the water he paused, irresolute, lifting his head and staring questioningly across the rippling sunset ocean.

Bronze's action told its own story. The police dog and those with him had departed by water after the murder. The scent was lost.

Infected by his collie's zeal, Donald moved toward the sea. But here the eddying of the wind had already brushed the sand across any possible footsteps. Bronze's nose could keep the trail to the water's edge. Human eyes could not. Apart from those few stray footsteps of the larger animal in hollows protected from the wind there was no sign of the slayer or of his police dog.

Steele turned back again to the silent body. Instinctively, at the sound of the others' approach, he covered the dead form again with the oilskin he had drawn aside.

"A wonderful actor! A great artist!" was the thought that seeped unbidden through his brain, bemused as it was with far more vitally startling images as he recalled the primly conventional and complaining little Mrs. Hyle. "But what was his game? What was he—"

"What's the matter?" called Ellman, breaking

in on his turmoil of meditations. "Anything wrong?"

Instantly, Steele was himself again. Spinning around, he faced the approaching trio. Agar and Ellman were carrying the water-bucket between them. Elsie, walking alongside, was describing interestedly the finding of the spring and the path leading to it.

Something in Donald's attitude, as he stood with his back to them, had caught Ellman's attention. Now, the sight of Steele's face brought all three to an astonished halt.

"Elsie," said Donald, trying to steady his voice, "go back, please!"

But if she divined his wish to spare her a horrifying sight, she was not minded to obey.

"What is it?" she queried, hurrying forward.

The two men, setting down the bucket, came running up. Steele would have spoken again, begging the girl to go back. But a vagrant puff of wind—rear guard of the passed-over gale—caught mischievously at a corner of the loose-lying pall of oilskin, and tossed it aside from the face beneath it.

Elsie gave an involuntary gasp and turned deathly pale. Steele moved forward to catch her, believing she was about to faint. But, almost at once, she recovered herself. Her eyes wandered glazedly over the delicate, paint-daubed features,

and the crisp short hair and rested at last on the tiny wound in the throat. Then her gaze met Donald Steele's.

"Oskar Brand!" she said, her voice so low that Steele read her lips rather than heard her words.

"Yes," he made answer. "He has left his sign-manual. We are close to the end of the trail now. No longer as hunters, but as the hunted."

Ellman and Agar had heard none of the brief colloquy. Both were staring down at the body under the oilskins. Ellman's face bore the foolish blankness of an imbecile's. Agar blinked dumbly and in the most impersonal curiosity at the made-up face and wigless head. It was he who at last broke the stillness.

"Why!" he blithered, his nasal voice flat and expressionless, "I—I don't believe she was a woman at all. Looks to me more like—like a man! Now, if that don't beat all! And she ain't even old, either. All a fake! What do you think of that, now?"

His pale eyes wandered around the group. On his leathery lips was a half-grin, as of a man who suspects a joke is being played on him and who is resolved not to be too much taken in by it.

His silly words jarred sharply on Steele's sensibilities.

"Yes," said Donald, "it is a man. And the man is dead. That is all we know. He—"

"No, it isn't either 'all we know,'" disputed Agar, leaning forward and touching with a bony forefinger the tiny hole below the ear. "We know he's been shot. Shot by a squirrel rifle. I've done too much squirrel hunting, when I was a boy, not to know the hole a .22 caliber bullet makes. It went in here. It came out there. See? But who has a rifle? We're the only folks here. None of us has got a gun. It's kind of funny, ain't it?"

"Oh, *don't!*" pleaded Elsie, gently drawing the oilskin in place again. "It seems so heartless to be standing here, arguing—right above him."

"Well," grunted Agar. "I can't see how it's heartless. He's nothing to any of us, is he? And he sure died in a funny way."

Ellman, at a glance of appeal from Elsie, linked his arm in the garrulous old fellow's, and walked to one side, taking the grumpily protesting Agar with him.

"Come," said Steele, his hand on Elsie's arm. "I want you to go somewhere and lie down and get a little rest. You look all in. It's been a fearful shock to you."

Obediently, she suffered him to lead her away. But as they went, she asked:

"How did Oskar Brand get here?"

"By boat," said Donald. "And he went away as he came. Bronze tracked him and Hunding to the water."

"But why?" she urged, shuddering. "Why did he kill that—that man? What was his object? What *could* have been his object?"

"What was his object in killing my brother?" countered Steele. "Both crimes seem objectless. And Eustace's death made Brand an outlaw. If I didn't know he is one of the craftiest and cleverest men on earth, I'd say he was a homicidal maniac. But he isn't. He's as sane as any of us. Yet these killings don't make sense. There's a string to this tangle that we can't grasp."

"You say he went away by water?" asked Elsie. "Then it must have been by a small boat. No large vessel could have come so close to this sloping shore. Besides, no large vessel could have come in sight and gotten out of sight in the short time we were down there by the spring. From the hillock we couldn't have helped seeing it. And if he came in a small boat, he couldn't have come from far away. Not in such a gale as we had, up to an hour ago. His hiding place must be very near here."

"It is," agreed Steele. "So near that I have an idea he saw us land, and then waited till one of our party was alone and asleep, and then came ashore and did the killing and hurried away again. That poor chap can't have been dead more than a few minutes. From his looks, he put up something of a fight, too."

"It's strange—it's horrible—to think we may be spied upon from somewhere!" she murmured.

As she spoke, her questioning eyes roved across the shimmering ocean. They came to rest on the nearest land—the island which Agar had likened to a derby hat.

"That's the only place from which our beach is visible," she said, musingly. "But that's an inverted bowl of smooth clay, hard-baked. There's no foothold. No one could climb on it. And if any one had, held have been just as visible to us, on the hillock, as the poor man on the beach could have been to him."

"Wherever he came from," said Steele, "I've a notion he didn't just happen to kill the only one of us who was alone. I think that dead man was the one he was after."

"But why?" she asked, surprised. "Why?"

"I thought this morning that it was on our account, or, rather, on mine, that the plane was tampered with. I don't think so now. I think it was tampered with to get that fellow out of the way. When I saw the gap under his wig this morning, I figured he was one of Brand's men and that the trip might be lively for me. That was why I asked if you had your gun. But if he was one of Brand's men, Brand wouldn't have killed him. That leaves only one other solution."

"You think he was—"

"A Secret Service man. The Secret Service, as well as the Revenue men, are hot after Brand, as I told you. And they have clever disguises. I believe this man was one of their best. A second-rater couldn't have been such a consummate actor. He was a man that Brand was afraid of. Brand found out about him and his disguise. He found he was going to make this flight. He arranged for him to be lost with the plane. When he saw him here he found he would have to be gotten out of the way in more summary fashion."

"I—I suppose you're right," agreed Elsie. "It —why it seems like a nightmare! Especially that Brand may be watching us from somewhere all the time—"

"That's absurd. More likely he was passing from one island to another in his boat and caught sight of the Secret Service man on the beach. Then—"

"Do you remember how the man refused to go on the water-hunt with us and went running back to the campfire? Do you suppose he had some idea of Brand's whereabouts and wanted to be left alone to explore?"

"Perhaps. And if he was the man Brand was looking for, we haven't anything more to fear—the rest of us—during our stay."

"But Brand must know that the news of this murder will give the Secret Service a clew to his

headquarters and will set them to scouring all these islands near here for him. It would have been wiser for him to—"

"Yes," said Donald. "I thought of that, too. That's another thread of the tangle that we aren't yet able to unravel. You're right about one thing: Even if Brand just happened here to-day, he may come back. And we'll keep a watch at night and by day, too. . . . Here is a hollow of soft sand. And it's shaded by that rock. I'm going to leave you here. Lie down and rest. You are keeping up by dint of will-power now, after all these shocks. You must get rest. Lie down and try to sleep. You won't be able to after all that's happened. But the lying still, and the effort to sleep, will rest you. I'll call you when we get dinner."

Leaving the protesting girl to settle down in the natural couch of sand, he went back to the others. Already he found they were at work on the task from which he had wanted Elsie Duff to be absent. Both were laboring with slabs of driftwood to scoop a grave in the sand.

Steele found a spade-shaped board and fell to work beside them. For perhaps half an hour no word was spoken. The only sound heard was the slither and grate of sand under the attack of the improvised spades and the labored breathing of the men.

At last the grim task was done, and only a stone-

bordered heap of sand marked the last resting place of the nameless man who, clad as a woman, had been done to death.

The three sweating toilers stood mutely above the mound. Then, stepping forward, Donald Steele began to speak in a low, reverent voice, reciting, to the best of his memory, portions of the beautiful Burial Service.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord," he began. *"He that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."*

Both the other men uncovered as Donald went on. They stood, with heads bowed, as he continued the glorious lines. When at last he ceased to speak, Agar sealed the service with a nasal "A-men!" Then, as if he were no longer under need for continuing his attitude of forced reverence, the old fellow remarked:

"He'll look kind of funny, won't he, come Judgment Day, when he rises in those petticoats and fal-lals?"

The two others turned away without answer, jarred and disgusted at his blatant callousness. And they began to make ready the evening meal.

As Steel finished his self-appointed task of cutting turtle steaks and brought them to the fire, he found Elsie Duff had come back from the sand couch and was busying herself with the coffee-pot. Helped by the two other men, she had spread a

makeshift table on a flat rock, and had even contrived to add a touch of feminine charm to it by dint of a little sheaf of rock-flowers she had gathered.

Nobody was hungry. Nobody could blot out the thought of the afternoon's tragedy. But hot coffee and the tenderly broiled turtle steaks and the toasted pilot biscuit speedily reminded them of the fact that they had been out in the windy air all day and that they had eaten but sparsely at noon.

As they ate and drank, the gloomy silence lifted. They found themselves talking almost cheerily as they planned for the night's successive watches and for their sleeping quarters.

Elsie, strongly against her will, was denied the right of standing her share of the watch. Early in the evening, Steele rigged up a spare oilskin, tentwise, over the soft sand-hollow behind its sheltering bowlder, far down the beach, as a bedroom for her. He and the other men prepared to bunk in a wide niche between two overhanging bowlders which fended off the never-dying trade-winds' cold night breath.

It was arranged that the three should divide the night into watches of three hours each—from nine to twelve, from midnight to three in the morning, and from three till six. Steele suggested this in view of the mysterious attack on the slain mas-

querader and on the chance the slayer might return under cover of darkness.

Donald offered to stand the first watch, while Agar should stand the second, and Ellman the third.

As the first watch began, Steele moved quietly along the beach until he neared the rock which separated him from Elsie's couch. Snapping his fingers he summoned Bronze, who was strolling a few paces behind him. Then Donald pointed to the ground directly in front of the rock.

"Lie down!" he whispered to the dog.

Bronze dropped to earth on the indicated spot and looked inquiringly up at his master.

"Stay there!" commanded Steele. "Stay. And *watch!* On guard, Bronze!"

Well did the collie understand the meaning of the order. And, Steele returned to his beat along the stony sand, satisfied that no mortal power could get through to molest the woman he loved without first passing over the dog's dead body.

Bronze, with a wistful glint in his deep-set dark eyes, noted Steele's departure. But he lay where he had been bidden to lie. And there, as Donald had foreseen, he would continue to lie on guard until his master should summon him from his vigil. Again and again Steele had left him thus in charge of some object. And never had the great dog been false to his trust.

Steele heaved a sigh of relief at knowledge of Elsie's safety. Then he walked slowly up and down the beach on his solitary patrol.

The stars were blazing down from the cloudless sky. Not the pale little stars which Northerners see, but the huge white stars of the sub-tropics, where the Great Dipper hangs upside down in the black velvet heavens, where Orion's Belt is perpendicular and his Sword is horizontal, where, in late hours, the overrated Southern Cross appears like a phosphorescent smudge on the low horizon.

The trade winds blew steady and chill. Across the glimmering sweep of water loomed the strange island which Steele had nicknamed "Agar's Derby."

By this faint light there was something sinister in its bowl-like silhouette, black against the starry horizon. As Steele's eyes rested on it, once, during his ceaseless tramp, a point of light seemed to be reflected momentarily on its inaccessibly smooth side.

Another step carried Donald out of range of the queer flash of reflection. Nor, stepping backward, could he attain the correct angle again to see it.

Deciding his tired eyes or his overstrained imagination had fooled him, and realizing that the stars were not strong enough, anyhow, to strike forth so bright a spot of reflection from anything on the island's dull mud sides, he resumed his march.

No one who has not stood sentry go by night can believe how endlessly long the hours can be to a weary man. A dozen times Donald Steele looked at the phosphorescent dial of his watch to see if he had not overstayed his three hours.

After an eternity of lonely pacing up and down in the densely silent gloom a last glimpse of his watch showed the hands pointing to midnight. With a feeling of keen anticipation in the prospect of six hours of sorely-needed sleep, he walked over to where Agar and Ellman sprawled under their oilskins side by side in the sandy bed and touched Agar's shoulder.

He expected to have to shake the shoulder repeatedly to bring the old fellow out of dreamland, and then to spend another five minutes in rousing him to a realization that it was his turn to go on sentry duty. To his surprise, Agar awoke and sat up at the first contact of Steele's fingers on his bony shoulders.

"Twelve o'clock?" asked the awakened sleeper, lowering his voice so as not to disturb Ellman. "All right. Gee, but those three hours sure slipped by like greased lightning! It's cold, too. Colder'n the night Washington crossed the Del'ware-Lackawanna. Why can't the tropics trop, and not freeze? So long, Steele. Sleep tight."

Still wrapped in his oilskin, the oldster got to his feet, stretched himself and set off on his march.

Steele cuddled down in the sand warmed by the other's body, kicked his shoes off, drew up his oil-skin and was dead asleep before his head fairly touched ground.

Seldom, outside of storybooks, does prolonged and unbroken slumber come to the man who is physically and nervously exhausted. For perhaps an hour Donald Steele slept like a log. Then, through his slumbers came threads of irritating memory. He woke with a convulsive start. Into his mind rushed the events of the day. And, all hope of getting drowsy again was at an end.

He took out his watch. The hour was a few minutes past one. Ellman was snoring peacefully. Steele had never felt wider awake. The waning crescent of the half-dead moon was hanging just over the eastern water-line, giving a dim ghostly illumination to the world.

Donald lay there, annoyed at his own inability to take advantage of the few hours' rest permitted him. His eyes rested lazily on the segment of white beach visible between the two rocks under whose shelter he reclined.

He had lain thus for several minutes before he was aware that subconsciously he was watching for something,—something which did not appear.

He was waiting to see Agar's gaunt body pass along the patch of beach on sentry go. By all his

reasoning the sentinel ought to cross that space at least once every two or three minutes.

Minute after minute passed. But Agar's silhouetted figure did not come in sight.

"The old fool has gone to sleep somewhere!" muttered Donald, vexedly. "Gone to sleep, and left us to be visited by Oskar Brand and every other bootlegger alive!"

Indignant at the sentinel's negligence, Steele crawled out of his comfortable bed of sand and fared forth to investigate. In his haste and annoyance he did not even pause to pull his shoes on.

Out onto the wanly lighted beach he strode, his stockinged feet soundless on the sand. There he stood for a few moments peering from end to end of the white beach line. No sign of Agar. Dim as was the thin crescent of the waning moon, its augmenting of the bright starlight, made the whole beach ghostily visible. Steele could not have missed sight of Agar had the old chap been standing or lying anywhere thereon.

Half angry, half frightened, Donald traversed the beach to its farthest extremity. At the end he paused. A faint sound had struck on his sensitive ears out of the night's dense silences.

Just beyond the beach was a litter of high rocks running out in a little promontory. On the other side of these was a plot of sheltered sand. Here,

in the afternoon, he and the two other men had buried the slain masquerader.

It was from this direction that the queer sounds issued. Steele felt a pringling sensation along his spine. Then, putting superstitious fear behind him, he stole forward noiselessly through the wide line of rocky fragments and toward the burial spot.

The distance was not more than a hundred feet or so. Yet, eager not to betray his approach, Steele moved with catlike slowness.

At last he paused behind the last and largest outcrop of rock which separated him from the plot of sand. For, no longer indistinct, the sounds again assailed his ear clearly heard and close at hand.

And now there could be no doubt as to their meaning.

Donald Steele crouched there, aghast, unbelieving.

Then, summoning his nerve, he lifted his head a few cautious inches and peeped through a broken gap in the rock's jagged top.

Vividly distinct, in the ghostly light, was every detail of the scene in front of him. Donald caught his breath and stared in trembling amaze.

"Either I've gone stark mad," he told himself, dizzily, "or else I'm still asleep and dreaming this! It—it isn't really happening. It—it can't!"

Chapter VIII

THE patch of white sand in front of Steele shone pallid in the unearthly dim light. In its center was the low-heaped grave they had dug a few hours earlier, with its rude outline of white coral stones.

Beside this mound was kneeling a black figure, —the figure of Agar.

The sounds which had caught Donald Steele's attention from the main beach were the strangled sobs—the harrowingly rending sobs—of a strong man who is a stranger to tears.

Agar was swaying back and forth on his knees, his lean body twisted by the force of his weeping, that storm of heart-broken sobs bursting hysterically from his throat in an utter abandonment of grief.

And this was the whimsically callous man who had scarce been able to hear the burial service recited to an end before shattering its solemnity by his conjecture as to the masquerader's costume on Judgment Day. This was the man who had enlivened the evening meal by heartless joke and chatter, while the others had been too oppressed by the day's tragedy to endure calmly his garrulity!

Here he was sobbing his heart out above the grave of one whom, presumably, he scarce knew. Here, at midnight, he was keeping vigil over the dead to the neglect of the living. Small wonder that Donald stared unbelieving at the impossible spectacle!

Then, while Steele was still watching, wide-eyed, the strange scene, the hoarsely raucous sobs merged into stricken words,—words spoken in a deep and broken voice which bore no trace of the nasal twang or dialect which had marked Agar's talk with the others of the party.

"Oh, my own boy!" sobbed the mourner aloud. "Dad's own splendid boy! I wish to God it was I who lay there, and not you! My glorious boy! Dad's little son! Harry, lad, I—"

A sliver of driftwood snapped noisily under Donald Steele's convulsively braced foot. On the instant, Agar was on his feet, tense, grimly alert. In place of the weeping father stood the sardonic oldster of the day before.

Steele came forward from the rock and faced the lanky black-clad figure.

"H'm!" grunted Agar. "Come to see if I was on the sent'nel-job, did you? Well, I am. I kinder thought I heard something out this way and I traipsed over here to rubber. I guess it wasn't anything, though. Unless, maybe, that poor dead

cuss is turning over in his grave because we planted him in skirts instead of pants."

He chuckled a little at his own ghoulish joke, then made as though to lead the way back to the beach. But Donald, on impulse, stopped him.

"Mr. Agar," said the younger man, very quietly. "I had no intent to spy on you. But—I reached this rock more than a minute before you saw me. It is only fair to tell you so."

For a long minute the two stared at each other dumbly in the weird half-light. Deep into Steele's eyes peered the old man. Either from what he read there, or from Donald's curt words, he came to a sudden resolve. When he spoke he had once more cast aside the nasal dialect and with it his assumption of garrulous awkwardness. Ramrod-straight and erect he towered above Steele, as he said, simply:

"He was my son. The only son I ever had. He is dead. I—I thank you, sir, for the sacred words you spoke over his grave when we laid him to sleep here. It meant more to me than you would care to know. Now, will you make me still further your debtor by forgetting what you have seen and heard here to-night? I am not asking it for myself, but for him. For the success of the mission he and I had so nearly achieved. It meant every-

thing to him. Help me carry it out by saying nothing of this. Will you promise?"

Steele did not speak. Something in his throat forbade speech at that moment. Agar went on:

"I shan't be baby enough to break down again, Mr. Steele. But I couldn't help coming to his resting place just once while you were all asleep. Just once to say good-by to the boy who was all I had in the world. I'm all right again now. Won't you do me the kindness not to speak of this to either of the others?"

"I shall not speak of it," promised Donald, after a battle with inquisitiveness. "And I shall not force your confidence. I give you my pledge not to tell what has happened here."

He was turning away, leaving the father with his dead. But, in a moment, Agar fell into step beside him as he made his difficult way back to the beach. For a few strides they walked together in silence. Then Agar laid a kindly hand on the other's shoulder.

"You are a good deal of a man, Mr. Steele," said he. "If you'll permit an old codger to say so. You are a man. You have played the man from first to last in this adventure. But never more so than in your promise just now. To grant my wish and to go on with no slightest curiosity about—"

"Hold on!" interposed Steele. "I don't deserve any of that. And most of all, I don't deserve the

part about having no curiosity. How can I help feeling curious? Here you two join us on the flight, one of you gotten up like a little old country woman and the other like a stage Rube. Then one of you is killed and the other cracks jokes about it. Then you turn out to be the dead man's father, and I find you mourning for him as David mourned for Absalom. And when you see me, you pretend at first that you're there by accident and you try to joke about it again. If that isn't enough to rouse the curiosity of a stone signpost then I don't know what is. Who are you? What are you? Not that it's any of my business, I suppose. But—"

He checked himself.

"I didn't mean to ask questions," he said apologetically. "Tell or not, just as you choose. And then go back to where your son is lying. I'll stand the rest of your watch and I'll come and let you know when it's time to wake Ellman."

They had reached the beach sand. Agar hesitated. Then he drew a long breath, and said:

"Thank you, Mr. Steele. You're white."

Again he hesitated. Then, as on sudden resolve, he added:

"I am John Agar, of the United States Secret Service. I am disobeying orders in telling you this. I—"

"The—"

"My son was Harry Agar, and he was the cleverest and best man of his age in the whole Service. Our superiors at Washington recognized that. That is why they sent him South with me on this work. He was only twenty-nine; but he had been in the Service seven years. And he had done great work. He had a wonderful future, my boy had. Ten times greater than mine can ever be. . . . And he died, in harness. That is the highest way, I think, a man can die. At his work. And he sleeps in this sandhole a thousand miles from home. That is the chance we men of the Service must take. He was ready for it. So was I. But it couldn't do any harm for me to watch for a little while by his grave before I took up the double load again."

He ceased, realizing that he was thinking aloud and that he had forgotten the presence of Donald.

Steele stretched forth a hand in silence and gripped the bony fingers that met his halfway. Then,

"It is you who are the MAN, sir," said Steele. "You and not I."

"Why?" asked Agar, in perfect sincerity. "We're under oath to do our duty, we members of the Department. Personal likes or dislikes or tragedies don't count there. My son and I were sent out to do something that others had failed to do. My son is dead. I haven't the right to

waste time in grieving for him. I must go ahead and do the rest of the job for both of us. There isn't any heroism or fine feathers about that. It all comes into the square-and-angle of my work. . . . I'm glad it was you, and not Ellman, who found me. He means all right. But he's a weak sister, at best. I figured you'd all be so dead-tired you'd none of you wake. I'd been over yonder only a few minutes."

"I'm sorry," said Donald, feeling the more ashamed.

"I'm not," answered Agar. "It's told me how you stand. I was pretty sure I had you sized up rightly long before that. But I couldn't be certain. And I couldn't take oath that Ellman wasn't a poor tool of the bunch I'm after. I was pretty sure, but I couldn't swear to it. I can't even now. In the Service a man has to be dead-certain of his ground before he takes a step that may smash the whole project he's working on. That's why I kept up the part. And, besides, there's the young lady. She's nice. And she seems to be a thoroughbred. But women get to talking sometimes. And, besides that, there's always a chance she may be one of them. They have clever workers, just as we have. So it—"

"She is the squarest woman I ever knew," declared Steele. "You can set your mind at rest about that."

"I didn't mean any offense," said Agar. "But my son and I weren't the only people playing parts. By the way, Florida's swarming all winter with folks from small towns and farms, you know. There are so many of them and some of them are so queer that it seemed to Harry and me the very safest thing we could do to take such rôles. Then, nosiness and prying in on other people's business wouldn't attract much attention. It would seem natural. Harry was the best impersonator the Department had. The Chief used to say my boy would have made a grand character-actor."

"He would," assented Steele.

"When you looked back at that roustabout on the float this morning," went on Agar, "and he looked up at you—then I own I suspected you. For I know about him. I figured you and he might be exchanging some signal. But here on the island I caught what you said to Ellman, asking about the fellow. So I—"

"Listen," interposed Donald. "I think I can set you straight on that and on one or two other things. And I've a strong notion that you and I were in Florida on the same mission. In fact, I know we were."

Briefly, he told of his brother's death, of Elsie's engagement to Eustace and her desire to track and punish her lover's killer, as well as his own oath to the same purpose.

"So you see," he ended, "she can be trusted."

"I—I suppose so," agreed Agar, with some reserve. "But it's odd—her disappearing like that, after your brother died. If she was engaged to him, you'd think—"

"It is all right," returned Donald, stiffly. "She told me she could not explain it yet. And she asked me to trust her. I do."

Agar shrugged his shoulders.

"I remember all about the Steele murder," he said. "I've talked with Department people who were on the case. If Brand hadn't killed your brother and run away, we would have had him by the heels in another week and stamped out the whole organized bootleg industry. We had the net closing all around him. But his running away and establishing new headquarters and another hiding-place—that threw us off. And it has allowed him to increase the industry and strengthen his organization fivefold. It is getting stronger and more farspread every month. Unless we can catch him we may as well give up any hope of checking illicit liquor running. Everything depends on our laying him by the heels."

"Would you mind telling me," asked Donald, "how and why you two happened to be on this flight of ours? If you were both so hot on Brand's trail why did you plan to waste the best part of a day in a pleasure-flight?"

Agar hesitated.

"Suppose two old farm-people, with a little money, take such a flight?" said he at last. "Suppose they get interested in this group of islands and figure they could raise some wonderful crop on one of them. Suppose they talk loudly about it all the way back and after they get to Miami. Suppose they are so excited that they charter the seaplane and her pilot for a longer flight over those same islands a few days later; a flight with stop-offs at some of the islands—stop-offs that will give them a chance to do quiet investigating while they're pretending to study soil-conditions with a view to leasing an island from the British Government?"

"Oh!" said Donald, beginning to understand. "Then to-day's flight was just your first step in—"

"In a series of long flights over these islands with certain clews in mind—clews others have supplied us. With those clews, in a week's time, I believe we could have dug out the location of Oskar Brand's headquarters. With luck, I believe we could even have kidnaped him by a trick we had worked out and brought him back to the States. It was a good scheme. And we'd worked out every step of it."

"I have been flying over these islands for months in the same hope," said Donald. "I didn't—"

"You hadn't the information that we had to guide you," explained Agar. "We had the benefit of the best spy work done by a dozen different members of the Service including one so-called scientific expedition of two months ago, and a fishing tour of last month. We were almost in sight of the goal. So were the 'scientists' and the 'fishermen,' for that matter," he added, less hopefully. "They were set back and fooled by a water current. That's why Harry and I decided to go by air."

"A water current?"

"Yes. Or a number of water currents or electric repulsion or—well—or any of the other things that the ancients used to call magic. In every mythology or collection of folk-tales there's a yarn about some island or coast that can't be reached because a mysterious force pushes ships away. For a long time those yarns were looked on by scientists as straight fairy stories. But in the Solomon Group and again off the Australian coast, and in one or two other places, islands have been discovered since then that couldn't be reached for some such reason."

"But—"

"Both parties of our men hit upon an island like that down in this group. They tried to reach it, but every time the cross-currents took hold of their boats and whisked them away. They tried it with

steam and with electric launches and by sail. No use. So Harry and I made up our minds to try it by air. They and we had worked out a pretty plausible theory from a sheaf of facts we pieced together. A theory that Brand is hiding on some island like that, and that it is his headquarters. We—"

In spite of himself, Donald Steele laughed aloud.

"Do you remember the old chemistry course joke," he asked, "about the man who claimed to have invented a chemical that would eat its way through any known substance, and the professor who asked him: 'Then, what are you going to keep it in?' Well, it seems to me you people have overlooked the same sort of obstacle. If the island has currents or electric repulsions that prevent landing, how does Brand get ashore there? How do his men get ashore?"

"Strangely enough," said Agar, dryly, "we thought of that. There are men who have fished and cruised these islands all their lives, and their fathers before them. Islanders, black or white, since the first discovery of the Bahamas. And it is certain such men or their ancestors must have worked out those currents and all their fluctuations and tortuous courses just as fishermen work out the narrow and twisted course of some rock-sown channel till they can pass in and out with ease over a route that would sink a ship whose helms-

man doesn't know the secret of the rocks. We believe there are islanders, conchs or negroes, who have worked out those currents so as to make any landing they may choose on Brand's island. They are the sort of men who would gladly take service under him for the extra pay and the excitement of it, and who would teach him and his boat captains the trick of moving along the right series of currents to his landing place. It would make an ideal retreat for him. Except by air, it couldn't be reached. And the nature of its terrain would prevent an airship from landing."

"The nature of its terrain?" echoed Steele, puzzled. "Then you know what sort of island it is?"

"They narrowed it down fairly well, and they made a guess. I needn't go into the details of that either, or how the facts were pieced together from a glimpse of a booze-launch that went behind a certain island and didn't emerge on the other side or a booze-steamer that lay in the same offing for a whole day, while boats went back and forth, always disappearing between two islands and then coming back empty of cargo. The other island was searched by the 'scientists', and it was just a precipice with a spring of fresh water and a few rock promontories. That put it pretty clearly up to the island they couldn't approach."

"What sort of island was the unapproachable one?"

For answer Agar pointed through the faint moonshine toward the bowl-shaped hill across the narrow strait—the hill Donald had nicknamed "Agar's Derby."

"So?" asked Steele, in keen interest. "But, during my flights over the Bahamas, I flew over not less than five islands of that general appearance. Volcanic formation, I suppose. Mountains of mud pushed up by a submarine earthquake from the slimy bottom of the ocean centuries ago and hardened to brick-clay by sun and wind. I counted no less than five of them, all in different parts of the Group. Lord, but I wish I'd brought my chart along yesterday! I'd be able in a minute to—"

He broke off in quick excitement.

"Brand was here yesterday!" he exclaimed. "And on this island here is a spring that the bootleggers must have used before they found water nearer to hand. Probably on that precipice islet back of 'Agar's Derby!' Agar, I swear I believe that derby-shaped island is the one you're looking for!"

"Yes," said Agar. "It is. I knew it as soon as you spoke of the spring here and the keg it is in and the path to it. I know that. But what good is it going to do us? We have no chart and we have no compass. Ellman's compass was smashed to flinders when we struck water yesterday. And we've no way of locating the island for future

use, or of getting to it from here. It isn't two miles away. But we know there are sharks in between. We couldn't swim it, even if we wanted to swim to suicide and even if the currents didn't drown us. We know where it is. We know where the planet Neptune is. But that's all the good it does us."

"No," denied Steele, his blood hot with this new excitement. "If the rest of us are left here alive till some airship rescues us the pilot of that ship will know the exact latitude and longitude of this island. By that—"

"Quite so," again assented the Secret Service man. "But Brand will realize that too. Do you really think for a minute that we're going to be left unmolested all that time? I've thought that out. Brand landed here and killed my son. He didn't do that out of the plain desire to kill. He isn't that sort. No, he must have got wind that Harry and I were working down in Florida, and his spies spotted us through all our disguise. That would be easy enough in my own case if any of them had seen me on some other case. I was figuring they hadn't. Because I've been almost all the time in the West this past two years. But somehow they did. And Brand gave orders to put us out of the way. That roustabout did his best by tampering with the seaplane. But we landed here alive. Brand investigated. He found Harry alone. And he got rid of him. He must have

watched us with a strong glass from his island, and found out when one of us was separated from the rest.

"That means he knows I'm alive here, too. And you. For that roustabout is one of Brand's best agents. And if he was the one who tried to knife you, then he knew or guessed you were trailing Brand instead of just loafing around and taking pleasure flights in your own plane. No, my friend, Brand isn't the man to leave the rest of us here to tell our rescuers that Harry was killed in the same way and apparently by the same man as Eustace Steele. That would give the Service a clew to his hiding place, and there'd be a gunboat anchored off it inside of a week. No, he's going to do his best to get us before we can be rescued."

"And we haven't a weapon among us!" exclaimed Steele.

For answer, John Agar drew from his two hip pockets a brace of .45-caliber automatic pistols.

"One of these was Harry's," he said. "I took it from him while Ellman was looking for boards to dig the grave with. And I took the clips of ammunition for it, too. That, with the clips of my own, gives us two loaded guns and a swad of spare cartridges. If we keep good watch and stay out of sight from shore as much as we can he'll have trouble in rushing us or in potting us at long range. At daylight we'll rig up a shirt on a palm sapling

somewhere on the high ground as a signal to any planes. And we'll hunt for some high place among the rocks up yonder for a camp and keep one man on guard all the time. I suggest we fill the other bucket from the spring—and fill every can or bottle we have—before daylight, and carry them up. For he'll be likely to have the spring watched, to pick off any one who goes there. He'll know we must have water. We'll lug the rest of the turtle up there, too, and the rest of the stores and the oilskins. Driftwood, too. With luck we may be able to stand the siege. Anyhow, it's well worth the chance. And it's the only chance we've got. Up there we can hold off any exposed landing party by daylight with a few shots. And your dog can warn us of any night-raid if he's any good as a guard. Say, where *is* your dog, anyhow?"

"I posted him alongside Miss Duff's bed," answered Donald. "I told him to stay there and to watch. That means he won't stir away without my leave, and it means he'll attack anything or anybody that goes near her."

"H'm!" commented Agar. "'Way back there out of sight of shore! He'd be a better guard patrolling the beach, or stationed out in the open. Still—I think I understand. I wish she weren't here. A woman's presence in any danger complicates matters. A man has to think first of her safety and after that of his own and of the rest

of the crowd's. Yes, the collie would be of more use as a watchdog if you hadn't posted him away back there."

"One of us is supposed to be patrolling the beach," Steele defended his action. "And that is the only place where anybody can get to us, unless by coming down over the hillock or past those lower rocks. And Bronze will see any one coming from the shoreward side."

"Perhaps so," said Agar, as they strolled toward the winking campfire far down the beach ahead of them. "Here's what puzzles me," pursued Steele. "If that 'Agar's Derby' island is just a huge slippery inverted bowl of clay, how can it be any one's headquarters or hiding place? It hasn't a tree or a rock or a ravine on it. I looked straight down when we flew over it to-day. It's as bald and as smooth as a finger-bowl. And there wasn't a soul in sight anywhere on it. There wasn't hiding place enough for a cat, either. There's a mistake somewhere."

"No," corrected Agar. "A *mystery* somewhere. That's the place. I don't know how it is. But it is. I'd take oath on it. It's been narrowed down to that. We—"

"You say you know the roustabout chap who tampered with the plane?" asked Donald, changing the subject to avoid argument with the stubborn old fellow. "Who is he?"

"I didn't say I knew him," denied Agar, "except by sight. But he's known to the Department. He was a German spy in the war, with a specialty of wrecking the machinery of Ally airships and the like. He was caught, but he escaped. Then he was caught again last year, in Savannah, on a bootleg charge. Brand used pull and cash and got him turned loose before the Department knew he was the same man who had been arrested in Flanders. He has a long record. I didn't notice him at all this morning till I saw him look up at you after we were in the air.

"Speaking of that island over yonder," he went on, returning to his theme, "it's the one, all right. Brand's visit to us proves it past doubt. I was sure of it, anyhow. So was Harry. That's why he left us this afternoon when we went to look for water. He wanted a half-hour alone there on the beach to study it through his field-glasses. They're mighty strong glasses. Here they are. Brand may have been looking at him through glasses at the same time. Or, Harry may have finished looking and may have pretended to go to sleep again for fear we'd get back sooner than he had figured. And it's then Brand may have come across here. But if he did he either must have had a record-speech launch, or else he must have landed somewhere below and sneaked up on him. He—"

The reverberation of a distant growl through the

stillness made both men start. Then the island reverberated to a salvo of challenging barks. There was fury, as well as challenge, in the barks. They echoed and reëchoed through hill and ravine and far out across the shimmering water.

"It's Bronze!" exclaimed Steele as he and Agar broke into a run. "And there's trouble. I know by the way he barks. What—"

A scream, guttural, agonized, ending in a gurgle, interrupted his words. Then, from farther away, from the same direction as issued the frantic barking, the running men could hear Elsie Duff call out in frightened query.

Followed a wallowing sound of splashing from closer at hand and instantly the almost inaudible purr of a motor. There was a soft swishing as of swift-parted water through which a narrow boat-prow cleaves.

Instinctively, as they ran, Steele and Agar turned their heads to locate the new sound.

A glimmering haze lay over the lower sea, hanging just above the water. Through this a dark object was speeding straight away from land. So Donald strained his eyes before he could make out the shape of a black motorboat built on racing lines, but with a stronger and more silent motor than any ordinary racing boat.

Sketchily he could make out a blurred human figure crouching low in the stern, though whether

it were the form of a giant or of a dwarf he could not tell. But, rearing, high amidships, was a more discernible shape. Tall, standing erect on the center seat and outlined against the background of luminous mist was an enormous wolflike creature staring back toward the shore.

"Hunding!" babbled Steele.

As if in answer came across the still water the sound of a snarl like that of a wild beast, yet fraught with a thousandfold more concentrated hate.

It was the same snarl that had assailed Donald Steele's ears on the night he had shouted so deliriously to Brand from the Beaulieu dock to come back and fight him. And the memory brought back to Steele a wave of that first mad anger.

Then the boat was swallowed up in the mists. And Steele and Agar had reached the dying campfire. Beside the embers, silhouetted against the white coral sand, sprawled a dark moveless figure.

A single glance identified the victim to Donald, even to his own light tweed overcoat which he had lent to Ellman as extra bed covering.

Steele left Agar to bend over the stricken pilot. He himself did not slacken speed, but dashed on down the beach and around its curve of rocks toward the couch he had prepared for Elsie.

As he reached the curve he all but collided with the girl. Roused from sleep by the noisy barking

of the collie and then alarmed by Ellman's death-cry, she had called out in frightened query. Receiving no answer, she had sprung up and hastened toward the sound.

At sight of her, Steele gasped aloud with relief to find her safe.

"What is it?" she demanded, catching him by the coat lapels and trembling all over. "Oh, what is it?"

"I was afraid it might scare you," replied Donald, speaking lightly. "That's why I sprinted down here. Ellman had a nightmare, and he 'set the wild echoes flying' and started Bronze to barking like a whole dog show. I knew you'd be startled. He's all right now. Go back to sleep, please. You've—" He made pretense of consulting his watch, "you've nearly five hours more to doze before it'll be time to help us get breakfast. If you hear him having another nightmare just be grateful that a second helping of rich turtle steak didn't have the same effect on you, and go to sleep again. Good night!"

As he turned to leave her, Bronze whimpered in stark eagerness to be allowed to go with him.

"No, old boy," said Donald. "Stay there! Stay there, and *watch!* And don't bark your fool head off next time Ellman has a bad dream," he finished loudly for Elsie's benefit.

Waiting only to see the girl withdraw around the

angle of the rock which shielded her sand-couch, Donald broke again into a run. In another minute he was standing beside Agar. "I've quieted her," he reported. "Is—"

"Yes," said Agar, shortly, as he wrought over the inert body, "stone dead. See?"

He pointed to Ellman's throat. By the flickering firelight, Donald saw such a wound as had slain Eustace Steele and young Agar.

"Through the carotid," explained Agar.

"We weren't a hundred yards away!" gasped Steele. "And we never even heard the shot through all this silence."

"Shot?" scoffed Agar. "No shot about it, any more than my boy was shot. If you'd made any sort of study of wounds, you'd know a bullet enters the body in exactly the same size as that bullet's caliber. But it goes out the other side in a torn space several times bigger. It never leaves a hole the same size in entering and in leaving. Now, look at those two marks. Exactly the same size. That's no shot."

"No shot? But, man—"

"Besides," said Agar, "we'd have heard any shot. In that stillness we'd have heard a toy torpedo. Even if he'd used a Maxim silencer we'd have heard it. It's only on the stage and in dime novels that a Maxim silencer makes a gun noiseless. I've seen them tested at Headquarters. There's always the

sound of a report. Muffled, of course. But you can hear it. No, he couldn't have been shot. Besides, I've just shown you that isn't a bullet wound."

"What is it then?" asked Steel, bewildered.

For a moment Agar did not reply. He was busy probing the wound, first from one side and then from the other.

"He must have waked up just as I did," mused Donald, staring down at the lifeless pilot. "Waked up cold and came to the fire to get warm. He—he had on my overcoat and my cap. He's nearly my size. Those clothes of his fitted me, you remember. By this light any watcher who had seen me to-day in that cap and coat would have mistaken him for me. He—"

"Just as I thought!" interrupted Agar in grim triumph, ceasing from his task, and rising to his feet. "Just as I thought. No pistol. No human hand made that wound."

"No *human* hand!" echoed Steele, his flesh creeping at the hint of the supernatural in Agar's solemn voice. "No *human* hand?"

"No," replied Agar. "No human hand killed him. Nor your brother. Nor my boy."

"Then how did they die?" insisted Steele. "Do you know?"

"Yes," said Agar. "I know. And I'll tell you. But I don't expect you to believe me."

Chapter IX

BREATHLESS, Donald Steele waited, while the Secret Service man stared gloomily down at Ellman.

"Go ahead," he prompted, as Agar still did not speak.

"I won't blame you for not believing me," said Agar, reluctantly. "I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it done. One or two of the correspondents sent stories back home about it. But it was a time when all sorts of impossible stories were being printed about the Germans. And I guess nobody believed it."

"Believed what?" asked Donald, his nerves on edge.

"What I'm going to tell you," returned Agar. "Here's the idea."

He paused, then continued:

"I was one of the Secret Service men on temporary duty with the A.E.F., for a while, early in 1918, just before the Hindenburg advance. I was quartered for a week in a sector whose farthest point was Crévique. It was a 'quiet sector.' That means there was more air-bombing and sniping and long-range shelling than active fighting.

One night, five of our men went out into No Man's Land to reconnoiter. The rest were ready to cover their retreat with 'fire-at-will' fusillades in case the German flares located them. The flares didn't. There weren't any flares. But not one of those five came back."

"Prisoners?"

"No. Nor yet the five that went out the next night. Of the five that went out the third night one came back. He was all torn and he was as shaky as a tremens victim. He told how they were all advancing, in open order, crawling on their hands and knees when the man nearest to him let out a yell that was stifled almost before he could hear it. Then, the same second, just as this fellow spun around to see what was wrong, something raked him across the side of the face, and something big and panting and hairy brushed heavily past him. It turned on him again, tearing at him and almost knocking him over. All in dead silence. He jabbed at it with his trench-knife, and one of his jabs must have gone home. For it tumbled over there in the dark and he bolted for our trenches. He was the only one who came back. I figured afterward that it was his quick turn of the head when he heard his bunkie sing out that saved him."

"From what?" asked the wondering Steele.

"Next night," resumed Agar, unheeding, "five

more men went out. It was tough to get volunteers by that time. And a minute or two after they started a rocket and a bunch of flares were sent up from a couple of hundred yards down our line. There had been a mistake in time and these were sent up at the wrong signal. But they made that strip of No Man's Land as light as day. And they showed up something that wasn't good to look at. We knew, then, how our men had been killed. The lights flared just as the dogs made their rush."

"The—dogs?"

"In the morning, a couple of us Secret Service men rounded up a handful of German prisoners that had been brought in a few nights earlier. And we interrogated them. At first they wouldn't talk. But we had ways of persuading them. Ways that the General didn't forbid after what he'd seen the night before."

"I don't understand."

"You may have read some of the uses the Germans put those big, wise, savage police dogs of theirs to during the war," said Agar. "Those Heinies were miracles at efficient teaching. And the police dogs were miracles at efficient learning. The combination was perfect. Well, among other things, some of the best teachers taught a corps of the cleverest and fiercest dogs the art of killing, *'spurlos,'*—without leaving a trace to tell how it

was done. They coached them in it till they got it perfect. The teachers wore sixty-pound padded armor-suits during the tutoring. For it wasn't a safe pastime."

"You mean they—"

"They got that stunt down so fine that a dog could give one jump at a man,—usually from behind,—and drive his upper and lower fang on one side of the jaws clean through the jugular and leave no torn place or any mark except those two tusk-holes,—about the size of a .22-caliber bullet. Then they turned a dozen of those efficient dogs loose in No Man's Land at nights. Many a poor doughboy went that way. So did many more French and British. And nobody guessed how till the flares showed us the dogs at work that night and till we made the prisoners explain. Bunches of those dogs were sent to different sectors. It was a grand deterrent to small reconnoiter parties."

"But how—"

"I got a chance to examine some of the wounds later. They were all the same. They didn't pierce clear through so the teeth met. There would have been danger of tearing. And that wouldn't have been artistic, besides giving the secret away. They just punctured the jugular or the carotid and stopped at that. I didn't get a chance to examine Harry's wound. But I examined Ellman's just now. And that's what did it. A German police

dog. One of the lot trained for it in the war. A dog that was a couple of years old then would still be in his prime now. And those police dogs never forget what once they've learned. Mr. Steele, it wasn't Oskar Brand who killed your brother and my boy and Ellman here. It was that big police dog of Oskar Brand's."

"Hunding!" muttered Steele, sick with horror.

"Whatever his name may be," assented Agar. "That's the one. We've got fairly good proof that Brand was in Germany during the war, and that he was mixed up in a lot of sweet stunts there. Besides, he was a breeder and trainer of police dogs apart from his other callings. And this dog you saw to-night was probably his best pupil."

Donald Steele listened, dumbfounded, to the calm recital. And, listening, he believed. Visualizing, in memory, the three killings, he could not doubt. Back into his recollection came scraps of camp gossip from his war days touching on this corps of super-trained police dogs and their incredible efficiency. No wonder Bronze had acquired so deathless a hatred for Hunding, sensing the latter's horrible trade or, later, knowing that it was Brand's dog and not Brand who had slain Eustace Steele! The collie's sense of smell had told him that even before he verified it by sniffing at Eustace's throat.

"I've been mulling over what you told me about your brother," continued Agar, "and adding to it what I remember hearing about the case. It was Hunding who killed Eustace Steele. But it is a thousand to one he did it without his master's orders and even against his master's wish. Oskar Brand had nothing to gain by the killing of your brother,—nothing except the gratifying of a petty spite. And he had everything to lose by it. Brand is shrewd. He'd never have thrown over his safety and become a fugitive for the sake of killing Steele in a way that he knew must be traced at once to him."

"Then how—"

"I figure it this way: Your brother had had a scrimmage once with Brand. He struck him. Hunding had been held back from interfering. His loyalty would make him hate forever the man who had struck his master. His blood and his training would have made the dog mark such a man for future attack at the first good opportunity. Very good. You and Brand have high words, almost a fight at your gate at Beaulieu. Your Bronze dashes out of your gate and pitches onto Hunding. The fight between them is stopped. Brand walks on. He takes his dog with him. The dog is raging over the stopped fight and over the hurts he's got. He's savage, dangerous, in a mood to kill. Down near the dock he and Brand meet your

brother. Here's the dog's chance. He sees the man he hates, the man who hit his master. Here's an opportunity to get some of the red murder-lust out of his system after his interrupted fight. A dog of that kind carries such a rage, just as a vengeful man does, and he's even more keen to sate it. Brand passes by your brother as Eustace is perhaps stepping up on the truck. Eustace's back is turned. It is Hunding's chance. You say the jugular was pierced from behind?"

"Yes. And Eustace was lying on his face beside the truck. He—"

"Exactly. Hunding can't resist the murder chance to exercise his old-time war tricks. Brand turns back at the sound and finds Eustace Steele struck down. He's wise is Brand. He knows what the police will make of that wound, when they know he and Eustace have quarreled and that Brand, in a drunken fit, threatened to 'get' Eustace. The police will know, too, that Brand is carrying a rifle of the same caliber as the wound. He won't have a chance. Nobody would believe the fantastic dog-bite yarn. And everybody would believe that Brand shot Steele. It will be murder in the first degree. He knows that. He has just one loophole. If he can board one of his passing booze-boats and get out of the country before the body is found he is safe. And that's what he does. The killing of Harry and of Ellman is different."

"How different? You mean he set the dog on them?"

"I don't doubt it. He saw Harry there alone. From his eyrie, wherever it is, he could probably see we were all far away. I believe he boarded that silent, quick launch of his, got near shore, somewhere out of sight, and then sent the dog overboard to creep up behind my boy and strike for the jugular. Harry's throat wound was from behind, too, you remember. To-night, cruising off-shore, to spy, Brand saw a man of your size and in your coat and cap bending over the fire. It was too dim for him to make out the features, of course; but he would recognize the cap and coat from seeing you in them by daylight. He works the boat close to shore and sends Hunding after you. The dog had gotten aboard again and the boat had just gotten under way when we saw it. I'll bet my savings and my year's pay that these guesses are a hundred per cent correct, all three of them."

Again, listening, Donald Steele knew the man was right. He nodded.

It was hard for him to speak. For nearly a year he had been trailing Oskar Brand to make him pay the life-forfeit for the slaying of Eustace. For nearly a year he had been obsessed and scourged on by that one all-possessing impulse. For nearly

a year, in his nightly prayers, his reiterated plea had been:

"Lord God, vengeance is Thine! Make *me* Thine instrument!"

And now—his tireless quest was in vain. He had been pursuing a man to whom no punishment was due from him. A savage brute had killed Eustace Steele. Brand had had no hand or desire or blame in the crime.

Where then was the avenging brother's justice-goal? All at once Donald felt dull and futile and objectless. His whole life purpose had dissolved. He had pursued a will-o'-the-wisp of retribution. He had no quarrel with Oskar Brand.

But, by that fierce quest, he had thrown his own life in jeopardy. Brand, learning or suspecting that he was trailed by the slain Steele's brother, had now sought in characteristic fashion to block the chase and ensure his own hazarded safety by destroying the man who was tracking him. First had come the attempt of the knifer in the avenue of Australian pines. Now, through Hunding, a second attempt had been made and an innocent man lay dead.

Elsie! The name flashed into Steele's dazed consciousness. Elsie had spent months in trying to track down her sweetheart's slayer and turn him over to justice. She, too, had been following a will-

o'-the-wisp. There was no vengeance due her. Her pitifully futile quest had been vain. And now it had stranded her in dire jeopardy.

In Steele's heart stirred an infinite pity for this girl whom he adored and who had devoted her own life to the memory of his brother. And with the pity was a keen pain. He loved her. He had loved no other woman in all his twenty-eight years.

Eustace had forever been falling in love with every new face. To him Elsie had been only the latest fancy. To Donald she was all the world and Heaven as well. Yet Eustace had won her. And, forever, she would be faithful to the dead.

If Eustace had lived, her deeper nature might have wearied of his shallower and more fickle soul. But, dead, he was a rival with whom Donald could not hope to compete. Nor would Steele be disloyal to his brother's memory by the useless effort to win her love.

Agar's voice lifted him from his gloomy reverie.

"We'd best bury poor Ellman before Miss Duff wakes up," said the Secret Service man. "There's no use giving her any more shocks than she'll have to stand, anyhow. By the way, I wish you hadn't been so worried about her to-night and hadn't put your collie on guard over her and forbidden him to move. She was safe enough. Brand can't be interested in getting her out of the way, can he? And the dog would have given us warning that

Brand was near. Ellman might have been saved, and we might have had the luck to shoot Hunding, —or even have landed a lucky pot-shot in Brand before he could get out of range. Well, no use crying over spilt chances! Help me lift him. The spade-boards are over yonder. So!"

Gray dawn was beginning to overcome the pale light of the dead sickle-moon, when Steele, chancing to look down the beach, saw Elsie Duff emerging from around the rocky curve. He hurried to meet her. Seeing him, she waited for him to come up. At her side was Bronze. The collie was eyeing reproachfully the master who had condemned him to guard that one spot on a night when the dog's nostrils and ears told him there were death and adventure abroad.

Steele snapped his fingers. At the signal, Bronze bounded joyously toward him, gleeful at his release from the stupid vigil. He bounded around the man, licking his hands, patting at his chest, barking thunderously, from sheer delight and welcome.

Donald patted the dog absentmindedly, then hastened on toward Elsie. Behind him, at the campfire, a furlong away, John Agar was busy stirring the embers to life in an effort to make hot coffee. He did not so much as look up at the distant advent of Elsie.

The girl had not the air of one who has slept brokenly and in her clothes. She was wondrously fresh and dainty there in the gray dawnlight, and her smile of greeting was radiant.

"Up already?" she asked, as her hand met Donald's. "I thought this was Mr. Ellman's watch. I woke up half an hour ago. I went down to the cave beyond the point for a dip. As I was starting back here I saw the strangest thing! Day was just beginning to break. And across the sea, from behind this island, came a little low yacht. It traveled ever so fast. And it made straight toward that island over there, the island you called 'Agar's Derby.' As it got near, it began to steer a twisty course. Then, all at once, right alongside the island, it disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Just that. Honestly, it did. Of course the light was bad and there was the mist on the water. But it seemed to me as though the yacht ran spang against the wall of that island and was swallowed up by it. Of course that's absurd. But it vanished, somewhere, without any warning at all. It didn't appear again beyond the bowl-shaped island either. For I stood and watched. Wasn't it queer?"

"Yes," he made dull answer. "It was—queer."

"I was going to hail it," she went on. "But I

didn't dare to without your leave. I was afraid it might be one of Oskar Brand's fleet. And—"

"You were right," he assented, still in that lifeless voice.

And now she noted his haggard face and his unwonted tone.

"What is it?" she demanded, in quick anxiety. "Is anything the matter?"

"Yes," said Donald. "And you have to be told. I'm sorry."

In as few words as might be, he spoke of Ellman's death and of Agar's theory as to the killer. He went on to tell of Agar's proof that the killing was not done by a bullet, and of Agar's belief, and his own, that Eustace Steele had been killed by Hunding and not by Brand. He omitted nothing, except the fact that Agar was a Secret Service agent and that the masquerader was his son. On these points he held himself to be bound by his promise.

Elsie listened without interruption, her eyes growing larger and her flower face paler. She seemed hypnotized by the recital. Nor, for a moment after Steele fell silent, did she speak.

"You—you believe this theory of his that the police dog killed Eustace?" she asked, at last. "That Hunding killed him and that Oskar Brand was not guilty at all? Do you?"

"Yes," he made instant reply. "I do. I know it. All along, you'll remember, you and I couldn't understand Brand's motive for such an insane deed. This explains everything. Our quest is ended, yours and mine."

"Ended!" she murmured, as in a dream. "Ended!—Yes—you are right. It is—ended!"

"I wish," he said, miserably, "I wish we had known all this before we came to Florida. Brand found out I was trying to get him. He wanted to guard not only his own safety but the hiding place of his liquor and the secret headquarters he had established. He found I was flying forever over these islands. He knew I was Eustace's brother. And he guessed what I must be after all the time, while I was thinking so smugly that I fooled him. To save himself and his hiding place from discovery, he planned to get rid of me and of the others who were following him. It was kill or be killed. And he preferred to kill. The Tiger's Claws again. I'd gladly take my own chance against him, if I hadn't dragged you into it."

"You didn't!" she denied. "And you shan't blame yourself. Tell me, honestly, Donald:—Are we going to escape from here? Are we?"

As he looked down into her upraised eyes the reassuring lie died unspoken on his lips.

"I don't know," he said, simply. "We are in God's hands, dear. His hands are stronger to

save than the Tiger's Claws to destroy. You can be certain Agar and I will do all we can to stand between you and every chance of danger."

"That's just what I don't want done!" she exclaimed. "We three are partners in this. And you men are not to take the burden of my extra care on your shoulders. We'll share and share alike in all the work and the danger. That must be understood. We are not two men and a woman, we are three partners."

Again her hand sought his. Again his fingers closed over the little palm. And again his memory of her love for Eustace arose like a wall between Steele and the girl whose hand he held.

"Coffee's ready!" called Agar, from the campfire. "You two folks want to come along and have some?"

Steele and the girl turned and started toward the distant fire. Bronze gamboled along merrily just in front of them, trotting back every few steps to accommodate his progress to their leisurely advance.

They were perhaps a hundred and fifty yards from Agar when the collie stopped short. A breath of dawn-wind was ruffling the waters. And Bronze lifted his head, sniffing at a scent it bore.

"He smells the coffee," suggested Elsie. "I don't blame him for looking hungry at such an odor. He—"

"He smells something much more important than coffee," said Donald, worriedly. "Watch him. He—"

The dog growled. They were nearing the twin rocks behind which the men had slept, and from whose rear the hillock sloped sharply upward. The dawn-wind eddied here, tossed in every direction by the obstacles it encountered. And, for the moment, Bronze could not locate the scent that had assailed him.

Then the mystery was solved.

From behind the rocks, not thirty feet away from the advancing man and girl, four figures arose.

They were sea-tanned men, barefoot and in jerseys. Each of them held a rifle. Two of the rifles menaced Donald Steele's breast. The two others were turned upon the more distant Agar.

The men spoke no word. Steele took an impulsive step forward, his muscles tensed for a spring. Bronze, with lowered head, charged the strangers.

One of the men shifted his rifle muzzle from a line with Steele's breast, and aimed it, point-blank, at the girl. In face of this silent threat, Donald came to a sliding halt. With a sharp word, he ordered Bronze back to him. The rifle at once ceased to threaten Elsie, and its muzzle was swung back again toward Steele

Still the four men said no word, but contented themselves with holding their three prisoners covered. Donald could see Agar standing owlishly beside the campfire, a look of foolish dismay frozen on his lean face, his hands instinctively raised high above his head.

And in his pockets, useless, now, reposed the two automatic pistols!

The men's immobility puzzled Steele. It was as though they were waiting for some one to give them further orders, as if they had done their part in landing below the projecting point of ground and in creeping up under shadow of the line of broken rocks, and then leveling their rifles at the three castaways.

"Well!" demanded Steele, sharply. "What next? What are you waiting for?"

The answer came almost instantly, though not from any of the four tanned seafarers.

Bronze raised his head angrily, facing seaward. And in his shaggy throat a ferocious growl was born. Donald glanced in the same direction.

There is no long period of twilight in the subtropics at dawn or at eventide as in the northern latitudes. At one minute it is daybreak or dusk and almost at the next there is sunrise or dark. So, now, out of the blue-green sea, up rolled the sun, turning the wavelets to a myriad vivid hues, dispersing the low-hanging haze.

Cutting through the shining patch of sea and heading from the big bowl-shaped island a motor-boat was speeding. In it sat the gigantic figure of Oskar Brand at the steering wheel. Crouched beside him loomed the grayish bulk of Hunding, the dog that was Brand's shadow.

Apparently, from some point of vantage, Brand had watched the capture of the three fugitives. And, when that capture was assured, he had set forth to take charge of the situation. It was Bronze whose nostrils and hearing had first detected the boat's approach. It was Bronze who now ran growling down to the beach, his hackles bristling, his curved fangs bared, his classic head low.

Hock-deep into the sea he waded. Hunding, rearing his great bulk, snarled murderously at him. The launch sped swiftly landward.

Brand bent down and lifted from the bottom of the boat the light rifle which Steele remembered so well. In leisurely fashion, his small eyes on the angrily oncoming collie, he lifted the weapon.

Steele, forgetting the death-risk to himself from the sailors' two leveled guns, stepped forward to check the deliberate killing. His lips were parted to recall Bronze to him. But the word of recall was not spoken. Nor did Oskar Brand pull trigger.

For, without warning, and goaded on by his hate for the collie which had once attacked him, Hunding gave a mighty spring that carried him clean of the careening boat and into the shallow water.

A forward rush of his mighty body bore him in a second to a footing. He was barely in time. For Bronze, dashing forward through the waves, was upon him. Nor dared Brand to shoot, lest the bullet kill his own beloved dog, in line with the collie.

Stomach deep in water, while the groundswell broke over their bodies, the two furious foes crashed together.

Hunding, following his training and instinct, drove brilliantly for the throat, seeking to sever the collie's jugular. Bronze shifted, opposing his shoulder to the assault, and slashed sideways for the other's throat.

Had the two been on land, this manœuver might have succeeded. For Bronze was as swift of foot as a deer and as deft at dodging. But the water impeded his motions, cramping the speed of his feathered legs.

Thus, Hunding's rending jaws closed midway between throat and shoulder, in a mattress of tawny hair, barely pinching the flesh beneath. But the impact of his blow nearly knocked the lighter dog down. Bronze's slash failed wholly of its

mark and seared a red cut across the police dog's foreface.

Then, instantly, the two were at each other again.

High they reared, on their hindlegs, striking for the throat. A roller,—the big "ninth wave,"—broke over them, engulfing them both, and sweeping them off their precarious footing before either could find a mark.

To their feet they scrambled, drenched, their thick coats matted close to their bodies. And now could be seen the difference in size and bulk and weight between the duelists.

The short-haired police dog's wetting had had little appreciable effect on his size. But it had made Bronze look a third smaller and as light as a greyhound. A wet collie's coat loses all its fluffiness and outstanding quality and sticks to its wearer as if glued to him. It reveals the gracefully slender outlines that are usually hidden by the mass of shaggy hair. And it reveals also how much of a collie's apparent size is due to coat and how little to body.

Up floundered the two foes, mouthing and snarling, and flew once more at each other.

Bronze feinted for Hunding's throat, as before, then ducked his head and drove for the foreleg, just below the shoulder. Not by accident did he strike for that spot. In this way his wolf-ancestors

had sought to cripple their opponents, either by crushing the foreleg bone or by tearing a tendon or by opening the large vein of the leg.

Half-blinded by salt sea-water as he was, and buffeted by a second wave, Bronze found his mark. His nose awash with the brine he gained his hold. And he gripped with all his wiry strength. His fangs and his short front teeth ground savagely through fur and skin and flesh in an industrious effort to find vein or tendon or bone. The sea poured stranglingly into his open mouth.

Hunding roared like a wounded tiger.

The police dog was not only a member of the craftiest and wisest breed on earth, but, like most of that breed, he was without fear. Courage and cunning came to his aid.

Instantly, he drove downward, seizing Bronze by the exposed shoulder—the nearest part of the collie's anatomy he could reach. Then, with all his strength and weight, Hunding pushed down.

Elsie Duff, at sight of the trick, cried aloud. Oskar Brand had hove to. His boat thirty feet off-shore, he was watching avidly. His red face, framed in its thatch of red hair and red beard, was puckered into an approving smile. Both he and Elsie saw Hunding's intent.

Bronze did not relinquish his leghold. But, under that awful pressure, his entire head went beneath the surface. And there Hunding held it.

The police dog's own nostrils were almost wholly free from water except as waves dashed over him. Thus, he could keep his hold, braced as he was, until the slighter dog should drown.

Had Bronze been a bulldog, he might possibly have held to his grip until he strangled to death. But a fighting collie is not like a fighting bulldog. He is like no other dog alive. He has an uncanny genius for seeking advantageous grips. But he has the wit to shift one grip for a better one with bewildering quickness. He is everywhere in general and nowhere in particular during a battle, which makes him an unpleasant antagonist.

Choking in agony, helpless, Bronze loosed the leg-hold. With a mighty wrench, he got his mouth and nostrils above water, and, twisting his dripping head, he slashed for the police's dog's nose. Hunding's shoulder grip availed little enough now that his foe was no longer drowning. And the knifelike cut across his tender nostrils made him let go.

Ragingly he sprang at the staggering Bronze. But Bronze was no longer there.

The moment he felt himself released the collie turned tail and bolted at full speed for the dry ground of the beach. Hunding, mad with bloodlust, hurled himself after the fleeing enemy. Oskar Brand laughed loudly:

"Your American cur is licked!" he chuckled. "See him run!"

Bronze, ten feet up on the beach, wheeled suddenly on his pursuer, before the latter could check his own rush, and laid Hunding's left side open, clean to the ribs, for six inches or more.

"Yes," jeered Steele, exultant, and forgetting his own plight in the thrill of the battle. "Yes, the 'American cur' is running away. Just as we American curs ran away from you Germans at Château-Thierry!"

With true collie wit, Bronze had shifted the scene of combat from the clogging and strangling waters—where he could not use his lightning quickness and where brute strength and weight must eventually conquer him—to the open beach. And his first stroke, there, had scored.

If the police dog realized how he had been outmanœuvered, it served but to double his maniac rage. Roaring, he charged. Bronze met him, foot to foot, jaw to jaw. The force of the charge knocked the collie off his feet and sent Hunding lurching forward over him by dint of his own momentum.

As Bronze fell, he tucked his feet, catlike, under him and snapped for the pale underbody of the police dog as it whizzed above him. His teeth met in the soft flesh. Hunding's rush served to aug-

ment the force of the upward bite and to score another agonizing hurt.

By the time the police dog could whirl around, Bronze was on his feet, this time dancing away from the charge instead of meeting it. Experience had taught him he could not oppose weight and strength enough to withstand his enemy on such terms. Thus he danced backward and sideways from the charge, wheeling and slashing as his opponent tore past him.

Maddened that he could not crush at once his slender opponent, Hunding charged thrice more, in blind fury. Each charge was rewarded by a slash or a nip that drew blood, and, twice out of the three times, the collie escaped unscathed, except for the jarring impact of the rush. The third time, in slashing the other's foreleg, a like slash laid open his own ear from end to end.

A collie and a police dog are practically the only members of the canine family to inherit the wolf-trait of slashing. Other dogs content themselves with mere biting.

As he danced back from the fourth charge, Bronze's flying hind foot slipped in the treacherous sand into a coral cleft several inches deep. His own momentum bore him backward. As a running dog might be caught and thrown by stepping into a fox trap, so Bronze was pitched heavily on his side. By luck his hindfoot fell clear of the

cleft, thus averting a broken paw. But he was thrown to earth with a breath-taking jar.

Before he could move, Hunding had plunged down upon him. The mighty jaws seized his throat, the jaws that could crush a beefbone as a man crushes a filbert,—the jaws that had let out the lives of Eustace Steele and Harry Agar and Ellman and of heaven only knows how many brave American soldiers in No Man's Land.

The viselike teeth gripped the throat above the jugular. Not aiming to break the neck, they cleft for that vital vein with all the police dog's scientific strength. But the bare throat of a human is by no means constructed like the throat of a heavy-coated collie. On either side of a collie's throat is an armor of mattress fur. And, in Bronze's case, this fur was just now watersoaked to a compactly sticky mass. A razor blade could scarcely have shorn a path through it.

Nevertheless, the awful pressure on the windpipe shut off Bronze's breath. The powerful weight pinning him down prevented any chance of wriggling free. Unable to breathe, unable to rise, the gallant collie writhed powerless. In another minute he must choke to death if the sharp eyeteeth failed to grind through the armor of wet hair to the jugular.

Then it was that collie pluck and collie wit came again to the tortured dog's aid. Even as Donald

Steele started forward to tear free the victor—even as Brand lifted his rifle to stop the American from interfering—Bronze rolled violently over on his back, shoving upward with all four feet at once. The feet smote Hunding resoundingly in the wounded body. The unexpected wrench and the leverage put too great a strain on the grip he had gained. The muscular jaws did not relax. It would have taken a mightier twist than Bronze's to loosen that deathgrip. But a mouthful of wet hair and a handful of collie skin came away under the tug.

Bronze was free. And Hunding's terrible jaws gripped only that mouthful of hair and skin.

Bleeding and in sharp pain from the ugly flesh-wound, the collie waited not for his foe to free his mouth of its gagging contents or to recover balance from his own backward head-toss. Bronze, indeed, did not wait to get to his own feet. Bracing himself and striking upward with unerring accuracy, he drove his teeth into Hunding's momentarily exposed throat.

Here at last was the goal. The strong white front teeth and the curved white fangs tore their path through the short fur and soft flesh. They found their mark.

Hunding thrashed wildly about, snapping and snarling. But there was no counter-hold he could gain, while the lighter dog was beneath him and

forcing his head upward. Brand raised his rifle, but he dared not shoot at one of the intertangled and tossing bodies lest he hit the other.

Hunding knew he had received his death. It was the death he had inflicted, again and again, on humans. None could know better than he its inevitability. Yet, fearlessly, futilely, he fought on with his ebbing strength. Presently, Bronze seemed to understand that his enemy was no longer any one's enemy. He released his grip, and bounded backward, panting.

Hunding took a wavering step toward him, snarled rattlingly, and fell dead on the trampled and blood-soaked beach.

The spell was broken,—the spell which had held the humans breathless. Oskar Brand cried out, as in pain. A sailor echoed the cry, but in consternation instead of anguish. Steele turned to see the cause. The guard and his three comrades were staring blankly toward the campfire.

Agar was no longer there. He had disappeared while his captors watched in mesmerized interest the battle.

Donald Steele, on the instant, sprang at the nearest sailor to snatch from him his unheeded rifle. As he did so he was aware of a sharp cracking sound and of a cry of fright from Elsie. Then a galaxy of fireworks exploded in his head and all the world turned black.

Chapter X

A CENTURY passed before Steele came back to earth from the bourne of spark-punctuated darkness through which he seemed to be drifting.

Through the swirl of headache and dizziness, once or twice, he fancied he heard the angry growl of a dog, the sobbing of a woman, the thud of running feet, a guttural voice barking curt commands.

Then all at once, as from a great black depth, his consciousness returned to him. Even as a knocked-out fighter or football player sometimes comes to himself in possession of strength and faculties, so Steele was almost himself again. From somewhere, he heard the guttural voice speaking. And now he realized it had been speaking at intervals since he had heard the sharp orders which had pierced his swoon.

"Young lady," Brand was saying, phlegmatically, as Donald's scattered senses rallied enough to catch the words, "this is the third time I have told you to stand where you are and not keep edging over toward him or toward those rocks. I must warn you again if you stir one yard I shall send a bullet through his brain."

From near him on the beach Steele could hear that same chokingly sobbing sound. Then, evidently from the boat, Oskar Brand spoke once more, this time less dictatorially.

"I tell you again he is not dead," said he. "He is not even badly hurt. He is stunned. It is not even brain-concussion. Presently he will come to himself none the worse except for a sore scalp. I never misplace my shots, though one aims uncertainly from a wabbling launch. If I had wanted to kill him, I'd have done it when I shot him. But I would rather talk to him, first—or, rather, hear him talk. If he is reticent, that can be overcome. So I creased a corner of his forehead where the frontal bone is thickest. My bullet barely kissed him as it passed. In another ten minutes or less he will be himself, except for a sore head. But he will not suffer long from that—or from anything else. Indeed, his sufferings would be past before now if he had had the bad luck to be inside of his own coat and cap at midnight."

Elsie drew her breath sharply between her teeth. Steele could hear her. And he yearned to comfort her.

"Yes," pursued the phlegmatic guttural voice. "Last night it seemed safer for me to get rid of you all as quickly and as easily as possible. For you are inconveniently near my home. And even *dummkopfs,* like Mr. Steele and his Secret Service

friend, might stumble on its secret, if they were near it long enough. And I chanced to be alone there. I could not be certain how soon a boatload of my men might come back. If they were delayed, there was a chance that searchers might find you first. So I wished to be on the safe side and finish what my agents on the mainland had begun at my orders. But, a half-hour ago, one of the smaller speed yachts returned with cargo. Or one of the larger motor-boats, if you prefer. So I decided to bring its crew across and take some of you alive. I am curious to know a few things that Mr. Steele or Agar can tell me. After that, it will be time enough for all three of you to be—well, *'versunkt spurlos,'* if you remember the unfortunate war phrase. In the meantime, as soon as my men have laid Agar by the heels, we will be on our way. That will be soon. They know this island. He doesn't. They'll corner him in a ravine or gully or round him up on some hill in another few minutes. All four of them used to be quartered here when we used its spring before we got water from the patch of rock across from our home. They know every inch of this place. I wonder they have not routed him out before now. He is probably better at hiding than at finding."

He ceased his deliberate speech. Elsie did not answer. Steele could hear her fighting back her sobs.

"If she cared for me," thought Donald, "if her heart wasn't buried with dear old Eustace, I'd get up and let her know I'm all right. But it's only pity. And he'll brag more freely to her than to me. Lord, but I wish Agar had given me one of those pistols!"

"By the way," resumed Brand. "I am planning a pretty little diversion for the trip to my island. I shall not take that collie along when we load the rest of you into the boat. Do you know why? The beast worships his master. When the dog sees Mr. Steele put out to sea, he will swim after. That is dog nature. He will swim after the departing man who is his god. . . . And the sharks will do the rest. They are by the thousand in the deep water among these islands just now. It will be amusing to see them surround him and fight for him. It will help soothe the big ache at my heart for my glorious Hunding's death."

From between carefully slitted lids, Donald Steele peeped out. He could see Elsie standing tremblingly in front of him. Midway down the beach lay the body of the police dog. Crouched close to Donald was Bronze, alternately licking his own hurts and staring unhappily at his motionless master.

"Bronze knows I'm alive," reflected Steele. "He knows it. He knows I've come to my senses. That is why he doesn't make more fuss over me."

Looking past the girl and the two dogs, Donald could descry Oskar Brand carelessly manipulating his boat, with just enough power on to keep it hove to a few yards offshore. Brand, at the moment, had let his own gaze rest broodingly on the dead police dog. Into the small eyes had crept a glint of genuine unhappiness.

"He was the only real friend I have had," said Brand, ruminatively, his sorrowing eyes roving over the inert gigantic body. "The only one. I —I have not had the faculty of making my fellow humans love me, only of making them fear and obey me. Even the dogs I trained obeyed through fear. All but Hunding. He cared. Each of us was all the other cared for. And he is dead. . . . That shall be added to the bill."

As though ashamed of his unwonted show of feeling, the big man shrugged his shoulders and faced Elsie.

"Miss Duff," he said, abruptly. "This past year I have learned much concerning you. I took pains to set inquiries afoot. I did it after I saw your face at my window at Beaulieu. Though you and the Steeles vowed you had been miles away at that time, yet at heart I knew it was not so. And when I slipped back to my home to get what I needed for my flight, I understood. My clock still stood at 12.04, as it had stood when I glanced at it at the time I saw you. It had stopped. The negro

who looked after my room had wound it too tight one noon. I had been away from home for two nights before and I had not noticed. That explained how you were able to be at the De Soto in Savannah at midnight and yet steal out to my house afterward. The stopped clock was a good alibi. But only until I knew the clock was stopped."

"Well?" asked Elsie, evenly, her show of emotion gone.

"I have friends at Washington," said Brand, a shade of boastfulness in his thick voice. "I pay them well. I was perplexed as to why a beautiful girl should be staring in at an old hulk like myself at such an hour. I had a suspicion. And I set my Washington friends to work. They reported to me that Miss Elsie Duff is a clever and valued young member of the United States Secret Service."

Donald Steele could not repress a slight start. Bronze raised his head and peered solicitously at his master. But Elsie and Brand were eyeing each other, and neither of them observed the move.

"I learned," repeated Brand, "that you were a new Secret Service agent, an apt and brilliant pupil of the famed Arline McKeon, who had caused Germany so much minor inconvenience in the war. I learned that she had gotten you into the Service

when you were left penniless by your father's death in the Argonne. I learned also that Arline McKeon was on duty in Savannah just then, with yourself as her helper, and that you and she called each other 'sister,' she going under the name of 'Mrs. Gray.' Also that the liquor traffic was the cause of your visit there. I found she had set an elaborate trap for me and for my best lieutenants during that stay and that it was almost ready to be sprung, when Eustace Steele's death made me decamp. She had bribed two of my negroes and you both had been in my house, in my absence, making searches. You and she came out there that night. You did not know I had returned. You saw the light in my window, I assume. And you investigated."

"Well?" asked Elsie, her sweet voice steady as her level gaze.

"I regret," sighed Brand, "I regret that 'Mrs. Gray' was too busy to make this flight with you. But she can be attended to later. By the way, it may amuse you to know that it was our friends in Washington who feared the net might close around me and who gave the Department that bit of vital fake information about my liquor cache, which made the Chief telegraph you and Arline to set out, post haste, from Savannah to New Orleans, early the morning after Eustace Steele was killed, and kept you both on that wild goose chase, in

the Southwest, for the next four months. I can tell you this quite freely, because, you see, you will never have a chance to repeat it. It is pleasant to talk at ease with an educated woman once more. And it is a pleasure to be able to tell important secrets to a woman, knowing she can never betray them."

He smiled at his effort at cheap cynicism. Then, his eyes shifting again to Donald, he said, impatiently:

"That fellow's skull must be thinner than I thought. Perhaps he is dead. The boat was pitching when I fired. But I hope he is alive. He has been a stumbling-block to me from the start. I didn't wish him to come on this flight. Ellman was a dunce, but this man is not. I feared he might be able to mend the broken plane, or at least to keep the party from disintegrating. I had sent a usually reliable man to get rid of him at Miami. But the best of us fail sometimes. You may try to revive him, if you wish. Perhaps he is shamming. If so, a rifle ball, chipping off the tip of his elbow would do much to shock him into his senses. I am told such injuries to the elbow are quite painful. Stand aside and I'll try."

But Elsie turned swiftly, keeping her own fragile body between Brand and the prostrate Donald. As she knelt in front of Steele, the latter opened his eyes. His brain afire with an inspiration that

had been growing upon him, he whispered, between moveless lips:

"Say I'm dead. Make him believe it."

Almost before the words were uttered, Elsie cried aloud, as in physical agony. Throwing herself on the sand beside Donald, she burst into a tempest of weeping. Then, seizing Steele by the shoulder, she shook him convulsively, her other hand above his heart.

In another instant she was on her feet, her slender body aquiver, her voice high and hysterical.

"The bullet went clean through the skull! Now, kill *me!* Kill *me,* I tell you! He was all the world to me. Kill me! I won't live without him."

There was a whirlwind of passion and mad heartbreak in her wild young voice. Her face was distorted with grief. Brand squinted at her in blank surprise. Bronze, at her outcry, jumped up, running solicitously toward her.

A soft hissing sound from between Donald's parted lips—a summons the dog had long since learned—made Bronze change his course and run to Steele's head. There, whimpering inquiry, the collie looked worriedly down into the still face of the man who continued at intervals to make those puzzling little hissing sounds.

Bronze knew the sounds for signals of some sort, addressed to himself, but he could not read them

aright. Hence, as Steele had foreseen, the collie was worried, to the point of nervous distress,—this being the way of collies in such dilemmas. The dog whimpered more loudly, licking his master's face, wriggling with unhappy perplexity. Then, as a climax, he laid his paw on Steele's shoulder and, with muzzle lifted skyward, waked the echoes with a long-drawn howl. More than once, in fun, had Steele stirred him into doing this, when the dog was wrought up by some proceedings he could not fathom. It was Bronze's mode of protest against the Incomprehensible.

And now it served its turn.

Brand had listened in wonder to Elsie's shrill wail of sorrow and had marked the sudden change from her former cool demeanor. He had seen her with Donald nearly a year ago. He knew they had been together at Miami. To him it seemed more than probable that they had been betrothed. Her grief, thus, might well be genuine. But Brand, as befitted his calling, was suspicious of everything and everybody.

Bronze's conduct, however, was another matter. To the onlooker the collie was in dire misery over his master's demise, and the hills reëchoed to his unearthly death-howl. The dog could not be acting. Brand was convinced.

With a turn of lever and of steering wheel, the German beached his light-draught motorboat in

the sand. Then, stepping into ankle-deep water, he strode ashore.

Elsie flung herself at him, as in a delirium of heartache.

"Kill me too!" she sobbed, flinging wide her arms. "Finish your work! Here I am! Shoot!"

As Brand made as if to push past her to examine the motionless body on the sand, she seized in both clutching little hands the barrel of the rifle which, still on guard, he carried at "port."

"Give it to me!" she implored, raving. "Give it to me and I'll do it myself!"

Angry, contemptuous, Brand rapped out a string of German oaths, and strove to wrest the weapon's barrel from her slender grasp. But she clung to it with the tenacity of hysteria.

It would have been the work of few seconds for the giant to wrench free the rifle. But he did not have even a few seconds to spare. With one hand he yanked at the gun's stock. He raised the other huge hand to strike her across the face by way of loosening her hold.

At the same instant, a lithe body slipped between the struggling pair. A fist blow, flush on the jaw, sent Brand staggering backward, his fingers involuntarily slackening their clasp on the rifle-stock. With all her young strength, Elsie jerked the weapon away from the loosened fingers before Brand could recover himself.

As he regained his imperiled balance he found himself confronted not by a mere girl, but by the supposedly dead Donald Steele, Steele white of face, with a trickle of blood oozing from the light fleshwound on his upper forehead; still a bit shaky from his mishap, but alert of mind and sinewy of body.

"Good girl!" sang out Donald. "Dandy little actress! Keep yourself and his gun out of our way. This is *my* meat!"

In the brief instant that he and Oskar Brand faced each other, the sound of a shot was borne to them on the wind.

"Pistol shot!" cried Steele, gayly. "Not rifle. Score one for Agar! He's stalking them. He—"

Then Brand rushed.

Ducking under the flailing arm, Donald sent his own right fist crashingly to the stomach, sidestepping as he did so.

Brand wheeled. But, now, instead of returning to the battle, he whipped his right hand toward his hip pocket.

"Elsie!" called Steele. "If he draws that pistol shoot!"

He dived in as he shouted. Flinging himself on the back-drawn right arm, he caught it by elbow and by wrist, exerting a skilful cross-pressure, jerking with all his dexterity and with all his returning muscular might. The suddenness of the move and

its use of leverage had the desired effect. Brand's arm straightened out spasmodically beneath the dual pressure. The pistol fell harmless to the sand.

Steele stepped aside and kicked at the fallen weapon to remove it farther from the scene of strife. As he did so, Brand's whizzing left fist smote him on the side of the head with ox-felling force.

Donald was knocked full eight feet along the beach before he came sprawling to the ground. But he was up as quickly as he was down. His head singing and buzzing from the blow, he lurched back to the fray just as Brand stooped to recover the pistol. Two inches lower and the German's frightful punch would have been a complete knock-out. But the side of the head is not a vital spot in a fist fight.

With a fraction of a second to spare, Steele leaped bodily upon Brand as the latter's fat fingers were about to close around the pistol's butt. The impact threw the stooping giant clean off his balance. With Donald atop of him he fell prone on his back.

But Steele fell with him, unable to check his own impetus. And before he could jump free the German's mighty hands had him by the throat.

It was a garroting grip, and it shut off Steele's powers of breathing as completely as would a steam-vise.

Nevertheless, the younger man wasted no time or energy in the fruitless effort to tear free. Instead, he volleyed fist blows with both hands and with all his strength into the bearded face of his opponent.

Under that fusillade of scientific, hard-driven punches, Brand writhed agonized, turning frantically from side to side in the effort to avoid the rain of blows. But not for a moment did he relax his merciless throat grip. And under that awful pressure Steele's lungs were bursting. He could feel his wiry strength begin to ebb. He was in torture.

Vaguely he was aware that Bronze was rending and slashing at the German in aid of his master. And he could not speak through the strangulation to bid the collie desist from this unsportsmanly interference in a fair fight.

His own mouth had flown open. His tongue was protruding. There was a thunder in his ears as the imprisoned blood beat against the tympanum. Through this tumult he heard another shot, apparently at some distance from the spot whence he had heard the first. Subconsciously he recognized this, too, as the report of a pistol, and not the more reverberant bang of a rifle.

Summoning all his ebbing strength and his scattering wits, he ceased to hammer the whole of the surface of the swollen face of the giant who was

rolling and thrashing about in the sand with him. He concentrated his vicious short-arm jabs for the point of the protruding jaw.

The jaw-point and an inch or so to either side of it is the vulnerable spot for which all pugilists play in seeking to land a knockout. And for the heavy-bearded jaw of his enemy Donald Steele slugged with all that was left of his force.

It seemed to him that he smote, thus, for an eternity of pain and of strangulation. Once, dimly, he felt the furry touch of Bronze's coat, as the collie sought out new areas of the gigantic body for his hurricane assault. But Steele had no energies to waste now in thrusting the dog aside.

Brand straightened both arms, pulling Steele back to greater length from him, hoping to take those ever-slugging fists out of range by dint of long reach, but relaxing not a jot of his own killing grip on the throat.

Steele struck, as the giant sought thus to render useless his attack. And Brand's own ruse aided the American. Hitherto, Donald's blows had been cramped by lack of space wherein to hit. Now, at full sweep of the arm, he concentrated all his last vestige of muscle into a swing for the swollen jaw.

The blow landed with an impact that could be heard for fifty feet. And it served its turn. The huge fingers fell away from their death-grip. Brand slumped backward, knocked senseless.

Across the giant body Donald Steele collapsed, fainting and weak.

The world was spinning around him. The blood still beat maddeningly in his ears. Each breath was a burning torment. He knew, dully, that he ought to rise and make complete his victory. But he could not. He could do nothing but lie there, helpless, athwart the body of his stunned foe, confusedly hoping he might regain strength and life and breath enough to renew the battle by the time Brand should come to his senses.

He could hear and feel Elsie Duff above him. But he could not tell whether she were trying to resuscitate him or not. Nor did it matter especially. For the moment nothing mattered especially. He had put upon himself all the goadings of his indomitable will power to shake away the dizziness of the rifle-graze and to spring to the attack when Elsie had hampered Brand's use of his rifle. By sheer will power he had ignored the dizziness of his own head and he had put up a good fight. But now he could bring himself to do no more. He was a wreck. And he lay there gasping, his brain awhirl.

Again he felt Elsie's touch, though it felt more as though her hand had brushed him accidentally in passing than as if she were ministering to him. But the touch pierced the fatigue mists.

If Brand should recover while Steele lay impo-

tently panting! It was not for himself he worried, but for Elsie. True, she had the man's rifle. But had she the knowledge or the nerve to use it against him if he should seek to wrest it from her fragile hands?

On that rifle's possession hung everything. Agar, evidently, was making good use of his two pistols back yonder in the tangle of hillocks and gullies and was stalking the four stupid sailors who had been sent to catch him, outwitting them, and picking them off, one by one, from his alternate hiding places with a craft worthy an Indian. But suppose one of the sailors should chance to reverse the situation, or that Brand, with all his cunning and his peerless marksmanship, should take a hand in the game?

The thought stung the worn-out man. It stung him to a superhuman effort. Straining, heaving, gasping, he rolled free of the bulk beneath him and reeled to his feet. There he swayed drunkenly back and forth, looking down through blurredly bloodshot eyes at his enemy.

Yes, he was in time. Brand had not recovered his senses during those few seconds which had seemed to Donald a hundred centuries. He lay there with shut eyes, his big face a mask of blood and bruises.

But, even now, his eyelids were twitching and his huge limbs were quivering with the approach of

consciousness' return. There was scant time to spare.

"The rifle!" croaked Donald, from a throat that was hideously sore and contracted. "The rifle, Elsie! Get it! And get his pistol, too. I can't even see them. Throw them both into the sea. Then, when he comes to, I can meet him fair, without—"

He paused, stupidly. His blinking eyes had made out Elsie as she stood before him. In her hands she carried the light rifle. But she made no move to obey him in the matter of getting rid of it. He took a staggering step toward her, at the same time glancing down to see how far Brand had advanced toward recovery.

Steele's vision was clearing as the blood receded from his brain and resumed its wonted course through vein and artery. He could see his foe more clearly. And now he noted that Elsie Duff's long silken scarf and the German's own leathern belt were fastened tightly and deftly about Brand's arms, pinioning them behind him. Also, that Bronze's thick collar encircled the man's ankles, shackling his feet together. He was trussed up, as effectively as one could desire and he lay there like a hog-tied steer.

With the hand which did not hold the rifle, Elsie was clutching Bronze by the ruff, while the collie whined and growled and strained to get back at

the body from which she had dragged him—the body which showed grewsome signs of his teeth.

"Sit down and rest," Elsie was begging Steele. "There is no more danger. And you look as if you were going to keel over. Sit down."

Instead, Donald looked apprehensively at the hillocks behind them. Then he tottered over to where the fallen pistol lay. Stooping with some difficulty, he picked it up.

"Keep the rifle," said he, "and keep under cover of the rocks. I'm going up there to see if I can be of any help to Agar. Thanks for tying up Brand so efficiently. He's coming to. But he can't get free. You're safe."

"You're not going a step up there!" she forbade, standing between him and the hillock. "Stay where you are. Mr. Agar is in about as much danger as a duck would be; thrown into a pond. Don't worry about him."

"What do you mean?" he asked, rubbing his bruised throat and trying to stand without swaying.

"I saw your eyelids twitch," she said irrelevantly. "And I saw the look of life come back to your face. So I knew you were conscious. Just as Oskar Brand is beginning to be, though he is shamming much better than you did. And I knew you were listening, too. Just as he is. You heard him say I'm in the Secret Service, didn't you?"

"Yes. But—"

"So is John Agar. He and I have known each other for two years."

"He never told me—"

"We are forbidden to tell. But it can do no harm to tell you now that the man disguised as 'Mrs. Hyle' was a Secret Service agent, too, and John Agar's son."

"He told me."

"He did?" she exclaimed, in surprise, adding: "But not till Harry Agar was dead. Then it could do no harm. He did not tell you I was one. Nor could I tell you he was. I haven't really the right to, now. But it will keep you from going up there, and perhaps getting shot at. That means more to me than—"

"What has that got to do with—"

"John Agar won his place in the Secret Service, first, because of his prowess in the army's Scout Corps, out in Arizona, in the 'nineties. He was one of the best scouts in the corps, they say. He learned every Apache trick of scouting. That is how he got away to-day during the dog fight. Once hidden in those hills, they'll never find him. And he has them at his mercy. He is the champion pistol shot of the Service. Now, you can see in how little danger he is. Oskar Brand was the only man we had to fear. Those others are poor stupid sailors, who—"

A third pistol shot,—scarce a hundred yards away,—was followed by a yell of agony and a crash. Despite her elaborately careless words, Elsie flinched at the sound, turning deathly white. Oskar Brand opened his eyes.

"Mr. Steele," he said, speaking calmly, and justifying the girl's statement that he had recovered his momentarily scattered senses some moments earlier. "Mr. Steele, perhaps you and I can talk business. It is worth the try. For these Secret Service folk can't be made to see their own interests. First of all, I swear to you I did not kill your brother. I swear it. Hunding sprang on him as we passed him that night. I did not know until I saw the dog had him down. I swear that."

"I believe it," answered Steele.

"Good! I feared you would not. That makes the rest easier. You are not a rich man. If you will set me free, it means a draft for $150,000 will be deposited to your account in the Miami Bank within one week. I give you my solemn oath on that. I—"

"I'm sure it must tire you to talk," said Donald, in no offense at all. "Rest till Mr. Agar comes back. I—"

"But—" began Brand in desperation.

A rustle of the sparse bushes among the scattering rocks of the gully below the beach interrupted him. Toward the group advanced one of the four

sailors. He wore a look of dazed fear. His hands were high above his head. Behind him strolled John Agar, a pistol held loose in one hand. At sight of the trio on the beach, Agar waved his other hand in careless greeting.

"Well, well!" he drawled. "Quite a little family party. I've been gunning up yonder. I got three. The fourth I brought along. We'll need him. I got a squint of you folks from up yonder. And I decided it was time to come down. So I jumped this fourth chap. He must know the currents over around 'Agar's Derby.' He'll steer us there. I've a notion to visit that cache before we start back to Miami with him and his boss. He's been telling me he and the three others came in on one of Brand's little electric yachts with a cargo early this morning. If four could work the boat here, then four can work her back to Miami."

Brand groaned aloud.

"Not Brand," explained Agar. "We'll just keep him tied for luck. He's needed too bad. But us three, and this promising seafaring man, who seems real eager to save his own skin by turning States' evidence. Suppose we pile into that launch now and get steered over to the Mystery Island? Let's lift Friend Oskar aboard first. Then we can transship him to the yacht. This fellow says there's due to be one or two more craft here in the next couple of days. So we haven't overmuch time to

waste. He says Brand stays there alone for the most part, doing his directing at long range. Kind of lonesome life. But his days of lonesomeness are past. Come on."

Three minutes later, the five, with Bronze, were headed for the bowl-shaped island. The sailor, with Agar's pistol still trained carelessly on him, was at the helm. In the bottom, at full length, lay the bound giant. Behind and around, the waters swirled with the half-seen bodies of a school of bonnet-nosed sharks that had marshaled in the channel on their northward pilgrimage.

Midway across the strait, Oskar Brand reared his fettered body to a sitting posture. Long he stared at the smooth-sided island they were approaching. Then his eyes fell to the shark-infested waters around him. With a motion incredibly swift for so large a man, he gave a mighty heave to his bound body. Before a hand could be outstretched to stay him, he was overboard.

Elsie screamed in horror at the shark-whirlpool that widened about his sinking body. But Steele thrust himself between her and the unspeakable sight. When she could look past his protecting shoulders there was no sign on the face of the waters of the rapid tragedy of a minute before.

"The tigers of the sea!" grimly commented Agar. "Tiger to the tigers! Peace to his soul—if he had one!"

Another five minutes brought them around the inaccessible mud sides of the island to a spot hidden from view by the precipice rock just beyond. There, full fifty feet high and a hundred feet wide, gaped an opening in the lower side of the smooth surface, an opening that went deep below the water-level. In through this shot the launch. Three of its occupants exclaimed in amazement. They were in a dim and deep and wide lagoon which filled the center of the hollow isle. Far above, faintly discernible in the glow of a single cluster of electric lights, they could see the bowl-like underside of the island's summit towering five hundred feet over them.

In the lagoon's center rode at anchor the trim little speed-yacht which Elsie had seen gliding past the beach at dawn. Rising abruptly from the lagoon on every side, and reached by six flights of steps cut in the brick-mud, was a plateau some ten feet above water. This stretched away for fully a hundred yards in all directions, and was almost as level as a floor. Here and there the island's walls, just above the plateau's outer sides, were pierced by cunningly-cut peepholes, whence any one standing on a low platform could have a clear view of the waters and the neighboring islands.

A seventy-foot ladder, propped against the wall, was topped by a larger peephole which apparently served as the chief lookout. From a distance of

only a few rods, on approaching the island, none of the refugees had been able to discern the outside opening of these windows, nor any other break in the hemisphere surface.

Here and there the plateau had been divided off into rooms of varying size. Through the open door of one of these a dynamo could be seen with a twinkling light above it.

But the bulk of the plateau's wide-stretching floor space was piled high with rank upon rank of casks and barrels and hogsheads. By the thousands they towered up toward the vaulted roof with an occasional hand-derrick or winch standing among them. Here at last was the secret storehouse of Oskar Brand's wholesale illicit industry!

It was Agar who broke the brief awed silence.

"I—I read once about this sort of place," he said, his voice hushed, "in a scientific book. But I never believed it. The book said there were a few such islands—most of them near Australia—islands that had been blown up by earthquakes from the muddy sea-bottom like great, big, mud soap bubbles, up through the top of the sea. There the sun and wind dried them, but they stayed hollow inside. It's—it's *true*. And here the trail ends! We'll give this Arabian Nights place an hour's lookover. Then we'll get aboard that speed-yacht and streak back to God's country. Steer us to those steps, sonny."

The inspection was over. Agar, with an armful of Brand's papers, led the way toward the landing stairs, the sailor pattering cringingly along behind him. Steele and Elsie loitered in following.

"By this time to-morrow," Donald was saying inconsequentially, "you'll be safe back in Miami to take up your work again. It—"

"No," she answered. "My work is over. I am through. My nerve is gone for this sort of thing after all we've been through in the past twenty-four hours. I am going to send in my resignation. I'd rather work as a day-laborer than—"

"I think I understand," he said, gently. "After following Oskar Brand for a year to avenge Eustace, it would seem sordid to work again just for abstract principles of justice."

"I—I didn't follow Oskar Brand to avenge Eustace," she disclaimed, after a moment's pause. "Eustace was nothing to me."

"What? But you told me—"

"No, I didn't. I said '*Suppose* a girl had been engaged to a man and he had been killed.' I didn't once say I was the girl. And I wasn't."

"But why tell me such a—such a—"

"I had to make you think so," she defended herself, a tremble in her soft voice. "Can't you see I *had* to, Donald? I was hunting for Oskar Brand. So were you. We had come to the same place on our hunt. Don't you see I had to give you some

reason that would account for my search? If I hadn't, you'd never have understood why I—a girl who was the merest acquaintance of your brother's—should be spending my life in tracking the man who was supposed to have killed him? I'd have had no motive in doing it. I had to let you think I had such a motive—a motive strong enough to make me devote myself to the quest. Oh, can't you see, Donald? Can't you? I—I *hated* myself for deceiving you! But I had to. . . . Won't you please forgive me? *Please,* Donald!"

Her pleadingly tearful little face was upturned to his in the faint light. Before she could guess his intent—before he himself was aware of it—he had caught her up in his arms, and was covering the appealing mouth and the wistful eyes with kisses.

Then, frightened lest he had offended her, he would have set her down. But he could not. For, somehow, her arms had become fast entwined about his neck.

"Say!" called Agar, peering back at them from the landing stairs. "Don't count on my saying I'm surprised. I knew it before either of you. I've been keeping out of the way this past half-hour to give you a chance. Gee, but you were slow in taking it!"

THE END